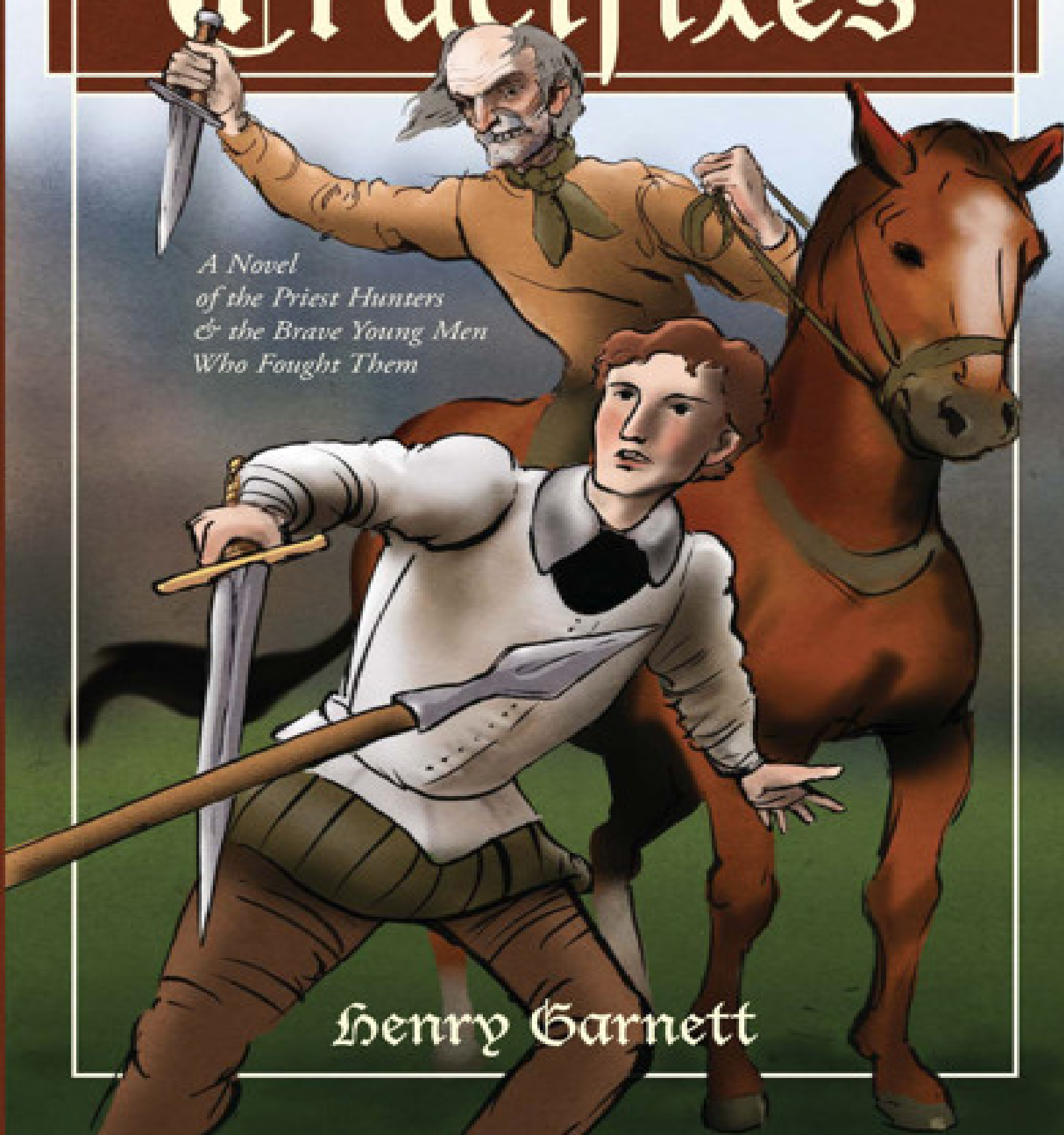


# Crossbows & Crucifixes

*A Novel  
of the Priest Hunters  
& the Brave Young Men  
Who Fought Them*

Henry Garnett



# **Crossbows and Crucifixes**

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Them*

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Also by Henry Garnett from Sophia Institute Press®:

*The Blood-Red Crescent*

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*This book is for my mother, who first introduced me to the “secret” country on the borders of Worcestershire and Herefordshire, in which much of the action in this story takes place.*

*Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds  
From the hid battlements of eternity.*

Francis Thompson

## Author's Note

You might be tempted to wonder, as you read this book, how much of it is true and how much I have invented for your entertainment. I would like, therefore, in the very beginning to assure you that nothing happens to Nicholas and his friends that did not, or could not, have happened to Catholics in sixteenth-century England. The wonder is that any Catholic families survived, as Catholics, to tell the tale. To explain why there was so much intolerance, I should have to write for you another book. You must take my word for the fact that there were both Catholics and Protestants who would go to any lengths to force their point of view on those of the other side. You should not have any difficulty in thinking of a modern parallel. Politics came into it, too, and the mixture of religion and politics is very explosive.

There are a few more facts about the book that might interest you. The part of the prayer quoted early in chapter 1 comes from *The Prayer Book of Queen Elizabeth*, first published in 1558. This prayer was added in 1569 after the Rebellion of the North. On the lighter side, you will be amused to know that the football story, also in chapter 1, is taken from the records of the real St. Peter's School, York, and that Christopher Dobson lived and took part in it.

You may accept as fact all that you read about the men who sailed in the ships called trows on the river Severn. They continued earning — and stealing — their living on that river until the last trow was built a century ago. Their legs that “swelled like skittle pins” were the same then as in this story.

Finally, I think I should tell you that the “secret” valley of the Sapey exists to this day and very much as I have described it. It is extremely difficult to get into, although I have, perhaps, for the purpose of the story, somewhat exaggerated the difficulty. But then, even I don't know what it was like in 1585.

By the way, a *pursuivant* was an official agent of the government. His duty was to enforce the laws against Catholics and to make sure they paid the fines imposed on them for being Catholics. *Papist* was a term of contempt and hostility applied to Catholics in the Elizabethan period. In time, many Catholics used it in referring to themselves as a term of honor.

*Henry Garnett London, 1961*

## Chapter 1

# Schoolboy's Tale

The July sun of 1585 slanted through the mullioned windows of the classroom, and in the yellow beams, a myriad dust motes danced. It patterned the bare boards of the floor and picked out here and there, in black shadow, deeply engraved names on the desktops.

The afternoon light shone directly on the head of a boy seated in a corner of the room and, with his every slight movement, revealed tints of auburn in his brown hair. His eyes were bent on the lid of his desk, and, with the tip of his tongue protruding from his lips, he was absorbed in deepening the letters of his own name carved in the wood. The small knife that he used for sharpening his quill pens was being drawn along the lower limb of the letter *E* when the master called his class to attention.

Nicholas Thorpe allowed the book he had been using as a shield to hide his carving from the teacher's eyes, to fall flat on the desk. He slipped his knife into his doublet and rose to his feet in one lithe movement. He revealed himself as a tall youth, taller than his classmates, with soft down where his beard would be, blurring the outline of a firm chin.

At a second order, the boys stepped out of their desks to form files in the aisles. Nicholas, at the age of fifteen, was the oldest as well as the tallest of his fellows, and so he was the last to leave the classroom.

Outside the buildings of St. Peter's School, York, Nicholas settled his soft bonnet on his head. He was soberly and rather shabbily dressed, and the white falling bands turned down over the collar of his gray doublet were crumpled and soiled. It was the end of the school week.

But his netherstocks were braced tightly and showed, as he walked, the promise of powerful muscles in calves and thighs.

The column of boys marched through Bootham Bar — the gate in the walls of York whose battlements and turrets frown down on the traveler — and passed on to the Minster. The gloom and chill inside the great cathedral struck Nicholas like a physical blow as he entered, as it always did, but on this summer afternoon, he did not look around the bare nave or peer at the even more naked chancel and sanctuary. The scars on the stone where the images of the saints had been roughly torn from their niches did not cause him a half-understood pain as they had in the past. He was preoccupied with his own thoughts and shared in the standing, sitting, and kneeling that seemed such an essential part of the ritual of the new State Church, without any real consciousness of what was going on about him.

Nicholas listened with only half his mind to the droning voice of the clergyman, until the words of the prayer for the queen, or the words of the prayer against Catholics — it seemed to come to the same thing, Nicholas thought — forced themselves on his attention.

. . . Defend, O Lord, Thy servant and our governor under Thee, our Queen Elizabeth, and all Thy people committed to her charge. O Lord, withstand the cruelty of all those which be common enemies as well to the truth of Thy eternal word, as to their own natural Prince and Country, and manifestly to this crown and realm of England . . . Make soft and tender the stony hearts of all those that exalt themselves against Thy truth, and seek either to trouble the quiet of this realm of England, or to oppress the crown of the same . . .

That prayer was written a year before I was born, in 1569, Nicholas said to himself, after the failure of the rising of the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland. They wanted to put Queen Mary of Scotland on the throne of England and bring back the Old Faith. The only results were heads falling on Tower Hill far away in London, and hundreds of sturdy north-countrymen hanging by the neck from

the branches of trees before their own cottage doors. He remembered the words of his headmaster, Master John Pullen, on the subject and suddenly realized why he was preoccupied.

In a few moments he would march behind his schoolfellows from the shadows of York Minster for the last time as a pupil of St. Peter's School. He would gather together the books that had been his daily companions for years and carry them in his own hands to Master Pullen's rooms, to render account of his guardianship of them. With the last thought, he grew serious again, and his mind turned to the words his headmaster would say to him. He expected that Master Pullen would give him advice and ask him a question. What was he to answer? How could he think about this when the black-clad figure, standing before the place where once the altar stood, bombarded his mind with words, asking him to pray for the undoing of his fellow countrymen who were Catholics? Papist convict recusants the government called them. How could he make up his mind? And in the moment, the answer began to whisper in his head.

At last, the final *amen* was said and the boys of St. Peter's began to file through the wide-open west doors, marching, it seemed, into the eye of the setting sun. Nicholas turned in the open doorway and looked back into the shadows of the Minster. Of course, he could not remember the departed glories of the cathedral, but his mother's friend, Sir James Croome, had spoken of them often enough, and vividly, too. It was easy for Nicholas, remembering his words, to people the dim nave with the cowled figures of monks and to see in his mind the ruby glow of the sanctuary lamp and the soft light of candles on the high altar and in the side chapels. Nicholas's nostrils distended as he sniffed imagined incense, and the skin between his shoulder blades pricked as he heard in his mind a sweet Gregorian chant sung by monks long dead. He swung on his heel and strode from the cathedral. As he went, the sinking sun flung a long, dark shadow behind him that stretched over the stone-flagged nave, and as Nicholas raised an arm to place his bonnet on his head, the shadow seemed to raise a ghostly hand in blessing.

Nicholas walked rapidly under Bootham Bar and back to the school buildings, and his former classroom. He ran his finger slowly over the carved name on his desk and, with the eternal optimism of youth, wondered if the time would come when some other boy would bring parent or friend to this desk and point out the name and say with awe, "Look, Nicholas Thorpe sat here." He laughed at himself and his fancies and, gathering his books beneath his arm, marched away to the headmaster's lodging.

The door was opened by Master John Pullen's serving-man. Nicholas struggled to speak, but his throat had gone dry, as it had on other occasions when he had been summoned to the headmaster's presence and, on the way, had searched his conscience to find what misdemeanors had been discovered. The serving-man's eyes twinkled. He knew precisely what was going on in Nicholas's mind.

"Master Nicholas Thorpe, isn't it? Well, come in, boy, come in! Master Pullen ain't going to eat you."

He led the way into a small room hung with tapestry. In spite of the warmth of the evening, a small fire burned in the hearth and an armed chair had been drawn up alongside it. Facing the chair stood a low stool. The serving-man busied himself with lighting a twig at the fire and, from it, two candles that stood in tall sticks on a heavy table among a litter of books.

"Sit yourself down, Master Nicholas," he said, waving his hand toward the stool. "Master Pullen's busy just now, but he'll see you as soon as he can. Don't be afeard now. Hungry?"

Nicholas shook his head.

"Tell the truth and shame the Devil, I always says. I never met the boy as wasn't sharp set at any time o' the day and that's a fact. Just you wait a minute."

The man disappeared, and returned with a cup of wine and a plate of candied violets in so short a time that Nicholas knew they had been prepared for him.

“There. Sup that up, lad. They do say as it loosens the tongue. Not that I’d know. Mild ale’s all I get, with a drop o’ strong beer on feast days, if things go right.”

He rubbed his hands on the sides of his breeches and then gazed on his palms with an air of surprise as if he had never seen them before. Nicholas fumbled in his pocket until he found the coin his mother had given him that morning. He dropped it lightly in the man’s fingers.

“My mother said I was to thank you . . .” Nicholas began.

“Ah,” the man said, rubbing his hands together. The coin had disappeared as rapidly and mysteriously as the pea under the wine cup that Nicholas had seen at the fairs. “Fine lady is Mistress Thorpe, as I well know, having been in York man and boy these many years. Your father, too, when he was with us. As fine a gentleman, he was, as ever walked up Petergate. Did me a good turn, too, in the Archbishop’s Court, he did. Over that little matter of . . .” He coughed discreetly. “Ah, well, mustn’t stand here talking. A fine lady, your mother is, as I said, and knows the customs of the school. My respects to her.”

“Matthew,” Nicholas said anxiously. “What will Master Pullen ask me?”

“Why now,” Matthew answered, rubbing the back of his head with a grimy hand. “That depends. Seeing as ’ow you haven’t been as bad as some, if worse than others, mind you, perhaps he won’t be too hard.” The twinkle came back into his eye. “All boys is varmint, as I well know, and Master Pullen knows it, too, so he makes allowances. I have heard tell he likes them what are leaving to tell him what they remembers best in the time they’ve been in St. Peter’s. ’Tis only what I’ve heard tell, mind you. You don’t catch me listening at doors. As

much as my place is worth, it'd be. Maybe, though, if the door's ajar, and me about my business . . .”

A sharp rapping, as from a stick on oaken boards, came from the inner room.

“The master,” Matthew said. “Now, you sit there and think what you're going to tell him, so it comes out slick. And mind you, keeps the candles trimmed. If there's one thing the master can't abide, it's the smell of tallow.”

Nicholas took a sip of his wine. As its warmth ran through him, he looked about the room. He had been there on a number of occasions during the ten years he had spent at St. Peter's School, but each time, his heart had been in his mouth and he had no very clear memories of his surroundings. Yet there seemed some change in the room, and he could not decide what it was. He wrenched his mind away from such idle speculation and forced himself to concentrate on what he would say to the headmaster. What did stand out most clearly in his memories of the last ten years?

Of course, he remembered distinctly the day he first came to the school. He was a terror-stricken baby of five. Before that, his life had been so happy. It had passed in a succession of golden days when the sun always shone and the trees in his father's garden had always been heavy with leaves and the flowers in the beds behind the neatly trimmed miniature box hedges were always in bloom. In that garden, his mother had time to play with him, and in the evenings, she would try to teach him to play the flute his grandmother had left him in her will.

But, he wondered, had it always been so happy? There were late afternoons when his lawyer father came home from the courts, with shoulders stooping and face parchment-white with long poring over papers in candlelight. Then Nicholas was called to the study and forced to learn letters from a hornbook. If he did not remember them

by the time the next lesson came around, he was beaten. But he had learned! He had! Even a few words of Latin and fewer of Greek.

A day came when his mother did not appear in the garden. All day long, he had wandered there, trying to amuse himself with his bow and the blunted arrows his father allowed him. And when he asked for his mother, the servants hushed him and told him to run away and play. He could not get any sense out of them. They no longer seemed reasonable people who would give a straight answer to a boy.

The next morning, he was pulled from his warm bed before the sun was up and scrubbed by a maid. He was going to school, he was told, to St. Peter's School, and he ought to think himself lucky that his father was a gentleman so that he had been accepted. It was hard to swallow his ale and manchet of bread because of the lump in his throat. Then, while drifts of mist were still clinging to the pinnacles of the cathedral towers, he was dragged by the hand up Stonegate, into Petergate, and under Bootham Bar to the school buildings. He had hated the journey, short as it was; hated the empty satchel bumping on his back; hated the feel of the maid's rough palm on his soft hand. Yet when they reached the school, he did not want to let it go. He had wept, and other boys had jeered at him.

Surely the headmaster would not want to know about that. Nor would he want to know how Nicholas had gone home that night, his little legs heavy as lead, and lids drooping over tired eyes, to see his mother lying in the great four-poster. She had turned her head on the pillows, smiled at him, and gathered him in her arms. She had whispered to him to look at his new sister, Elizabeth. There she was, red-faced and wrinkled, like a minute copy of the old woman who sat at the ruined arch that had been the gate of St. Mary's Abbey, and who stretched a begging claw to passersby. She was tightly wrapped in shawls in the cradle. His cradle!

Of course, he had become used to it all, so that the serving-maid no longer needed to fling the coverlets from his warm body in the

mornings. He jumped from his bed without urging at six o'clock and trotted away up the Stonegate, with now a heavy satchel bumping on his back, so that he would have a few minutes to talk to his friends before the school trooped into the cathedral at seven for the first service of the day. The regular routine made the time pass quickly.

Then had come that awful day when he was a little more than eight years old. The lessons at home had stopped a long time before, and Nicholas had become accustomed to his father's illness.

Every evening, he had to go into the great bedroom, where the four-poster stood like a little curtained room within a greater, and give an account of the day's work at school. It seemed that daily his father grew smaller until his body barely raised the blankets, and his nose grew more high-bridged and pinched. Then came the evening when he opened the heavy oaken door to the house and found the servants red-eyed with weeping and his mother sitting silently in the parlor. His father was dead, she told him and took him by the hand to the side of the great bed. It wasn't his father who lay there. It was the image of an austere stranger carved in yellowed marble, so no tears came. It was with a certain pride that he walked by his mother's side behind the bier up Stonegate and along Petergate to the Minster. He lifted his chin when he saw that some of the flagstones in the cathedral, over which he passed twice daily, had been lifted, and realized that his father's body was to lie beneath them. He caught himself looking forward to the next day, when he would show his friends where his father lay. They would disbelieve that his father was a man of great enough importance to lie in such a place. Then the masons would come, and he would be able to show his companions the name "Edward Thorpe" and the dates of his birth and death carved on the stone.

Nicholas, sitting waiting in the headmaster's anteroom, realized how little his father's death had affected him. His feelings, as he remembered them, were more of awe and reverence than of love.

It must have been a long time before he discovered that life in the Thorpes' house was not as easy as it had been. Perhaps it was years before he noticed that when his uncles came to visit, voices were raised in the parlor, and when they left, his mother cried for days. It was different when Sir James Croome came. Then, on summer evenings, his mother, the little Elizabeth, and he sat in the garden, and the gaily clad Sir James picked out tunes on his lute while they all sang madrigals together. Sometimes Sir James brought another gentleman with him, who had the curious name of Mr. Greenleaf. He was difficult to understand. He was quiet and soberly dressed and never cocked his sword at a jaunty angle, as Sir James did, but somehow in his company there was content and peace.

Nicholas reined in his thoughts. He was half-dreaming in the warm and darkening room, and there was nothing in his mind that Master John Pullen would want to know.

Would the headmaster expect to be reminded of the day of his worst punishment? Nicholas smiled as he thought of it, but at the time, he had trembled with foreboding and bent his head in shame every time Master Pullen came into the classroom. It had happened so naturally, too. His particular friend had been Christopher Dobson in those days. Dear Kit, Nicholas thought, he was always full of ideas for new pranks. Now, as a pompous Oxford undergraduate at Gloucester Hall, preparing to be a clergyman, he looks down his nose, when he comes home, at the boys shouting and running in the streets of York.

It was different in that September two or three years ago. Christopher had come into the cathedral, his cheeks ruddy from the game he had been playing, with his football under his arm. "Ho, Nick!" he had shouted and kicked his ball hard down the aisle. Nicholas had swung about and gathered it in his hands and kicked it back so that it took the unsuspecting Christopher full in the stomach, and he let out a whoop of pain and surprise. From the assembled school there came a sound of mingled titters and gasps of horror. Nicholas remembered the sudden shock of a verger's heavy hand on his shoulder and the

ravings of the minister before whom he and Kit stood in the vestry a few moments later. He could not call all the words to mind now. There had been a lot about blasphemy, sacrilege, spawn of the Devil, and hellfire. The headmaster had been quieter when he spoke to the boys later, in the same little anteroom where Nicholas sat in thought. Looking back, he imagined he had detected a trace of amusement in Master Pullen's manner, but if there were, it did not ease the punishment. Kit was judged the worse because he brought the ball into the cathedral, so he was sentenced to a day in the stocks, and he shared also Nicholas's punishment of six strokes with the birch.

There did not seem any reason why Master Pullen should want him to talk about that, Nicholas reflected. After all, it was written in the school logbook. He had seen it himself. First, there was the name of Christopher Dobson with his crime and his punishment. Then followed: "Nicholas Thorpe — for having plaied at the footeball within the Cathedrall Church of Yorke, to have six yerkes with a birchen rod upon his buttocks."

For a time, he had been a little hero in the school and small boys watched him open-eyed and open-mouthed as he stood at table to eat his lunch. His mother had cried, not for his shame and his crime, but for his pain and the sight of the red weals across his back.

There was another time when he had been closeted with the headmaster. That was a gentler interview without the dire consequences of birchen rods and red weals. It had, like the football in the cathedral, happened innocently and accidentally.

It was a gentle summer evening like the one just ended, and he had chosen to walk home by a different route with a friend of the moment. They had strolled outside the city walls on the edge of the moat, seeking flat stones to skip over the surface of the water. Playing "ducks and drakes" they called it, and as they went, they wagered fantastic sums on the number of times each stone would ricochet from the water before it sank beneath the scum.

“I bet you a thousand marks mine will bounce five times.” Nicholas could hear himself saying it.

“I bet you a hundred thousand mine will bounce six times,” his friend replied.

“And a hundred old nobles of gold,” Nicholas said.

So, laughing, arms about one another’s shoulders, they turned into the Abbey Gate, passed the ruins of St. Mary’s Abbey, now become a quarry for the rich merchants of the city who were busy building themselves great houses, and found themselves on the edge of a laughing, jostling crowd.

“What is it?” Nicholas asked. “There isn’t a fair, is there?”

His friend was silent, and the two boys wormed their way beneath elbows, dodging occasional blows, until they found themselves in the forefront of the crowd immediately behind a rank of pikemen. In the midst of the green, where so few years before, the monks had taken quiet exercise, stood a platform, and rising from it was a gibbet prepared with rope and ladder for an execution. The executioner himself stood there, a long shining knife thrust through his belt. The condemned man stood with his hands joined as if in prayer and his head was bowed. Before him stood the dean of the Cathedral reading from a book. When the dean had made an end of reading aloud, the man about to die raised his head and, in a clear voice, spoke to the crowd. The jeering and the laughter ceased, and the multitude moved a little forward, swaying like standing corn when a breeze passes over it.

“I commend me to all good Catholics” the condemned man said. “And I pray God to preserve Her Majesty the Queen. I pray God also that Catholics may not fare the worse for my sake, and I exhort them to remember that I die for my faith and my priesthood.”

The priest raised his face to the skies empurpled by the coming night, and, crossing himself, he cried in a loud voice, *"In nomine Patris, et Fillii, et Spiritus Sancti. Maria mater gratiae, Maria mater misericordiae, tu me a malo protege, et hora mortis suscipe. In manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum."*

The little hairs on the back of Nicholas's neck rose and prickled, and his eyes swam with unshed tears. When he could next see, the priest's body was writhing at the end of the rope, and the executioner's knife flashed as the rope was cut. The priest's hands moved, groping toward his neck as he was pulled roughly to the executioner's butcher's block. Once more the knife flashed, and a thin scream tore the air. A deep sigh rose from the crowd. Nicholas, half-blind and gasping for air as if he himself had dangled in a noose, fought his way between packed bodies of men and women, unheeding of the cuffs that fell on his head and his shoulders. At last, he won his way free and raced, heart pounding, into Lendal, on his way for Stonegate and the security of home.

Sitting in the headmaster's anteroom with the halos of two candles making twin pools of light in the darkness, Nicholas knew that in that moment, he had left his carefree childhood behind and had begun to grow into a young man. A log fell in the fireplace and sighed into a mound of ash.

At home that night, his mother had marveled at his white face and swollen eyes. He refused his food, and when at last he had yielded to her pleading and swallowed a few mouthfuls, he had vomited on the floor. It had been the same the next day at school and for three days following. He could no more keep his teacher's words in his head than he could keep his mother's food in his belly. At last, his teacher, in despair, sent him to the headmaster, complaining that he had a humor in his stomach and should be physicked.

Master Pullen sat, a year before, in the carved armchair that still waited empty, and with gentle words drew the story from Nicholas.

Then, speaking softly, he had talked of the state of England, of the bitter war that raged between Protestant and Catholic. He spoke of persecution and of how Catholics were fined until their estates were gone, how they were imprisoned, tortured in mind and body, by those with the authority of the government behind them.

As man to man they had talked — the Reverend John Pullen, Bachelor of Arts of Cambridge University, and Nicholas Thorpe, schoolboy of St. Peter's, York.

When he left the little anteroom that evening, Nicholas thought he understood, and his mother had kissed him when at the supper table he had asked for second helpings. And then he had told the story to his mother, but she had only said that these things were too deep for her. She promised that he should talk to Mr. Green-leaf when next he came, and thereby gave Nicholas another mystery to turn over in his mind.

Nicholas stretched out his hand for the cup that still contained a mouthful of wine and leaped to his feet, his heart thumping. The headmaster was seated in the armed chair smiling at him. When and how he had entered silently Nicholas could not tell.

"Shall I tell you what you were thinking about, Nicholas?" Master Pullen asked quietly and held up a hand for silence as the boy opened his mouth to speak. "No, I will tell you, and then you shall say if I am right. You were thinking about the priest you saw executed a year ago and you have thought about him every day since. Isn't that so, Nicholas?"

"Yes, sir," Nicholas answered. "I thought I understood when you talked to me, but I don't. How could he die so bravely and ask a blessing on the queen almost with his last breath?"

"This is something you must resolve in your own mind, and if you want help . . ." The headmaster paused for a moment and then asked abruptly. "Can you swear to keep a secret, Nicholas?"

“I can keep a secret without swearing, sir,” Nicholas answered proudly.

“Then tell your thoughts to Mr. Greenleaf. He might have been the man you saw in the executioner’s hands and, for that matter, might be yet. Goodbye, Nicholas. Someday you will thank me for giving you time to think, on the eve of the day your life is changing. Come back and see me if you wish. If you do, come soon. I shall not be here much longer. Goodbye, and God bless you.”

Nicholas walked home wondering why he had not been questioned and his books had been left unexamined. On his way, he realized why the headmaster’s room had seemed different to him. In a corner, stood a small desk at which a man could kneel and pray. A faldstool, they used to call it, Nicholas remembered. Above it hung a great wrought-iron cross, and they had not been there before.

In the house in the Stonegate, his mother ran to welcome him. “Guess who’s here,” she said and led him into the parlor. Sir James Croome stood, straggle-legged, before the hearth, gay and debonair. On a stool near to where the flames would leap in winter, and where now Mistress Thorpe had massed pied daisies, lady’s-smocks all silver white, and a border of violets blue between the firedogs, sat Mr. Greenleaf, smiling. And rising from another stool was Nicholas’s friend and sometime schoolfellow, Philip Topsham.

## Chapter 2

### Spy Out the Land

Benjamin Hoarfrost sat in his mean, half-furnished room in the city of London and coughed harshly. In appearance, he was rather like a bird of prey, a deformed vulture perhaps. His head, with its lifeless wisps of hair and its hollow unshaved cheeks, was balanced on a thin, wrinkled neck that no ruff could hide. On his thin legs, his netherstocks were always wrinkled around the ankles and they bagged at the knees. He wore no sword, but at his belt, ready to his right hand, hung a dagger with a razor edge. At times, his lashless lids would rise and reveal eyes that were so strangely alive that they belied the apparent decay of his body. They burned with a venom and hatred of the world.

London was covered with a blanket of low cloud, and from far away beyond the wooded heights of Hampstead, there came an occasional growl of thunder. Benjamin Hoarfrost's room was stifling hot, and his forehead was beaded with sweat, but when he limped to his window and flung it wide, the stench rising from the decaying offal in the Fleet River below was so overpowering that he hurriedly slammed the casement into place. He coughed and spat into the dead ashes in the fireplace, and sat down to read again the words written on the paper in his hand.

They were few enough. On the paper was written: "Tonight at the sign of the 'Duck.' Nine of the clock. J.D." Hoarfrost knew well enough what that meant. The "Duck" was a low hostelry reached by a dark and twisting passage off the Strand, and in a private room of the inn, Joab Dyson gave instructions to his spies and those who organized the persecution of Catholics county by county — the pursuivants. The message was not to be lightly disregarded, for although neither Lord Burghley, the Lord High Treasurer of England, nor Sir Francis

Walsingham, Secretary of State, had ever heard of Benjamin Hoarfrost, Joab Dyson was their trusted servant and tool in all matters concerned with the suppression of Papism.

Hoarfrost knew, therefore, that the message carried as much weight as if it had been signed by either of these statesmen. Nevertheless he could not make up his mind.

For some years, Hoarfrost had been one of Master Dyson's valued spies, and it was his proud boast that during this time, he had brought to ruin, to prison cell, to castle dungeon and the rack, or to the gallows no fewer than 130 Catholics who refused to conform to the new State Church. Recusants the government called them. One hundred thirty, laymen and priests! He felt he should have been properly rewarded, perhaps with a pension, or at least with a secure and profitable office under one of the Ministers of State. But until this sultry August evening of 1585, no message had come from Master Joab Dyson for six long months, and Benjamin Hoarfrost was uneasy in his mind.

There were two reasons for Hoarfrost's uneasiness. The first was that, during his six months' unemployment, he had mixed with some of the extreme Puritans. Their interpretation of the more bloodthirsty texts of the Old Testament appealed to his nature. What was worse — fool that he had been — he had spoken violently against the State Church for, as he believed, imitating some of the rites that were practiced by the Catholics. He, of all men, should have remembered that there are spies to spy on spies and Master Dyson hated the Puritans almost as much as he hated the Papists.

Secondly, Hoarfrost remembered the hoard of money that lay safely in the hole behind the loose bricks some five feet up his chimney. All of it, the marks, nobles, reals, pistoles, in silver and in gold, had come from Catholic purses. Some came from legal fines for recusancy that had somehow never reached Her Majesty's Treasury. Some of it had been given to him as bribes to cease his persecution.

Part of the store of coins came from the pockets of those about to take their last walk on earth, and they had no further use for money.

Yet it was true that the richer Benjamin Hoarfrost grew, the poorer was Joab Dyson, and had that powerful gentleman decided that the time had come to reimburse himself? If he had learned the secret of the hole behind the chimney bricks, and Hoarfrost knew it was not impossible, it might be better to ignore the summons to the “Duck.” Hoarfrost sat in thought. Suddenly he made up his mind to obey the summons.

He rose to his feet and went silently down the stairs. Only the sound of his cough marked his passage, and the thieves and confidence men who found sordid lodging in the same house overlooking the Fleet River shuddered at the sound, as men do upon whom the shadow of evil falls.

To Hoarfrost’s surprise, some half-dozen agents were gathered around Master Dyson’s table. Some Hoarfrost knew, and others were strangers to him until Dyson named them one by one and charged them all to remember one another. Then he spread a large map on the table and began to speak.

“I am going to talk to you about affairs of state,” he began. “And affairs of state are secret. You must not reveal what I tell you to any living soul; neither must you talk of them between yourselves. If you are tempted to speak to your wives of what I say, or if you babble in your cups, be sure that I shall know. Untrustworthy agents can be eliminated!” He paused and smiled at the assembled company. Hoarfrost’s cough put exclamation marks behind the words.

“I am sure you understand me perfectly, gentlemen,” Dyson went on. “Now, all England will soon know that the woman who calls herself the Queen of Scots is to be the guest of our gracious Lady Elizabeth at Chartley Hall in Derbyshire, where Sir Amias Paulet will look after her adequately.” Joab Dyson paused and smiled bleakly. “Very

adequately. It is no secret that there have been many plots to remove from us our gracious lady to replace her by this woman of Scotland. What is secret is that we have discovered another and most dangerous plot with the same object. My Lord High Treasurer and Mr. Secretary can take no action until the plot is ripe and the names of all concerned in it known to us. In the meantime, the development of the plot is being watched. It would, perhaps, be easy for conspirators to take the person of the woman Mary away from the guardianship of Sir Amias if there were sufficient force used. It might be easy for assassins to deal the foul blow that would take from us our queen — you all know her habits and her fondness for showing herself to the people. It might not be so easy to overcome all Her Majesty's Ministers, but an attempt could be made. But in the end, the success of such a conspiracy would depend on a rising of Mary's supporters at the same time all over England."

"Why send her to Chartley, then?" one of the men around the table growled. "Send her somewhere secret. Or better still, send her to a place from which she will never come back."

Master Dyson looked at the speaker in the candlelight for long seconds and then answered him as he would have answered a child.

"While she is at Chartley, we know the houses of her supporters round about. We know all their habits. Would you have us start again in fresh surroundings? And do you think it possible to keep secret the whereabouts of a woman who calls herself Queen Regnant of Scotland and Dowager Queen of France? There is more sense in the second part of your remark, but you have reckoned without the Lady Elizabeth. If this happened, heads would roll on Tower Hill, and you, my friend, would find yourself — you would all find yourselves — jerking on the ends of ropes. Everything in the matter of the so-called Queen of Scots must be done legally and openly. That is no concern of yours. Your part in it I will explain to you now."

Joab Dyson smoothed the map and moved the candles so that it lay in a pool of light.

“Here is Worcestershire. This is Master Benjamin Hoarfrost’s territory. He has already operated there. Here is a list of recusants who live in that county.”

He tossed a roll of paper to Hoarfrost, who took it and laid it unopened on one side. He had no need of a list of the Worcestershire Papists. He knew them all, those of noble blood, the gentlemen, and the meaner sort, but Master Dyson must be humored.

“It will be Hoarfrost’s duty to let me know everything about these families. I want every detail of their daily lives. How they occupy their time; who visits them; where they go if they are away from home; everything — day by day.”

Benjamin Hoarfrost opened his mouth and coughed. “But Master Dyson . . .” he began.

Dyson interrupted. “I know you can’t be everywhere at once. You’ll have helpers, and you will pay them.”

A deep sigh rose from all the men gathered around the table, and Dyson smiled his bleak smile once more.

“Yes, I know what you are thinking. In this matter, my Lord Burghley has seen fit to provide the funds. The money will be given to you before you leave tonight. It is as important as that.”

The dark faces in the candlelight brightened, and there was a general movement as Master Dyson’s agents eased their bodies on their stools.

“If you find any of these recusants are involved in this plot, play them on a string. Let them think they are working in safety, and then at the end, they will be ripe for the gallows. Any who refuse to take part in

the plot are yours to handle as you will. Enforce the payment of fines for not attending the parish church. Remember that any word spoken about the queen's successor is an offense. Punishments for doing this are laid down in the 'Statute of Silence,' as they call the act that has just been passed. Enforce them. There are jails. Fill them. My Lord Treasurer is paying out good money for this practice. Fill his empty coffers from Papists' purses. Search for priests. Knock at recusant doors night after night. Strip their beds, and run your swords into their mattresses. Break down the paneling in their rooms; scatter the burning coals from their hearths. Harry them without ceasing so that we may live in peace and happiness in this free land. Take particular heed to priests. These, if you find them — and you will — I want in London until there is not a gallows tree unused and the news of it reaches as far as Rome."

Joab Dyson sat back in his chair and refreshed himself from a beaker of wine while his agents looked on enviously.

"What I have said to Master Hoarfrost applies to all of you," he continued. "Now, let us go on to other parts." He tossed a paper to the man on Hoarfrost's right. "You, George Pigeon, will have your native county of Devon. There are not so many of these idolatrous Papists there, but you have the coasts and the ports. It is by way of these, especially the little places that only Devon men know, that some of the subtle Jesuits come to spy out the land and corrupt our people. Stop up these holes, Master Pigeon. Let them come on land, but no farther. And make sure that none of them goes back . . ."

So, county by county, went on the enterprise for clearing England of those who held to the Old Faith. At last, Master Dyson came to the end of his orders, and string bags of coins were issued to the agents.

"This will serve you for the moment," Joab Dyson said. "When you need more money, you must let me know. But with proper handling of the affairs in your areas, there should be no need to ask for funds. Those who are not for us can pay for their own destruction."

Hoarfrost looked with distress at his leader. It was quite foreign to his nature to admit so openly the purpose that had been put before the company.

Some three weeks later, the landlord of the Talbot Inn in Sudbury, Worcester, was aroused from his corner of the settle by insistent clamoring in his stableyard. He waddled out to find Master Benjamin Hoarfrost demanding stabling. With him were three men who were not, the landlord thought, the sort of guests he wanted, nor for that matter did he fancy the appearance of their leader. Nevertheless, a postboy had brought him news three days before that a Master Hoarfrost was riding on the queen's business and must be received.

At the same time, he had to remember that the dean and some members of the chapter from the Cathedral of Worcester, just over the highway, were in the habit of using his house several evenings in the week. He had to remember, too, that some of these gentlemen were not completely in sympathy with the policy of the queen's government.

Life, he thought, was extremely difficult for a poor innkeeper. Even more worrying was the fact that Sir Robert Lygon, the well-known Catholic, had drunk a tankard of ale at the Sign of the Talbot earlier in the day and might well return for another before he faced the journey to his mansion at Madresfield. Life was more than difficult — it was becoming impossible. He shouted hoarsely for the hostler.

Master Benjamin Hoarfrost did not dismount immediately. He crouched over his saddle and coughed.

"A room for me and accommodation for my men," he ordered. "Name of Hoarfrost."

The landlord rubbed his hands together and bowed.

"Yes, Master Hoarfrost," he said and his eyes slid sideways to those who sat their horses behind the twisted figure of Benjamin. "Yes,

Master Hoarfrost. The room is ready and the bed aired with the warming pan . . . But . . .”

“But what, man?” Hoarfrost demanded.

“Well, sir, today’s market day, and on Mondays it’s not easy.”

Hoarfrost’s eyes opened wide, and the landlord shuddered.

“You see,” he continued, “I didn’t know. I thought it was just you. There isn’t room for more than one.”

Hoarfrost put a leg over the saddle and lowered himself to the ground. He limped to the landlord and peered into his face.

“You mean there’s nowhere for my men?” He coughed, and the landlord drew back a pace.

“It’s just that, Master,” he said. “It’s a small place, this is. But at the sign of the Swan with Two Necks, just up Friar Street, there’s room enough.”

The three men behind sat on their horses without moving. They seemed quite indifferent to the conversation.

“Yes, I see,” Hoarfrost said. “I lie here while my men go to the Swan — what did you call it?”

“With Two . . .” the landlord of the Talbot began. Hoarfrost ignored him.

“Unsaddle,” he said to his followers. “Make room in the stables. Now . . .” He turned to the landlord. “Now, a meal in a private room for four. Afterward you can find truckle beds for these three, or for that matter, they can sleep in the rushes.”

With a whisper of steel against leather, Hoarfrost’s knife came out and was laid against the back of the landlord’s hand.

“Yes, yes, master,” the landlord quavered. “I do my best, but it’s difficult. Help you if I can.” He turned toward the house, and his heart dropped when he saw Sir Robert Lygon lounging in the doorway.

“Pursuivant,” he whispered as he sidled past Sir Robert. The knight laughed.

“Then send him on his way.” Sir Robert did not trouble to lower his voice, and Hoarfrost swung about and unveiled his baleful eyes.

“Send him on his way, Boniface. By Christopher, we don’t want his sort in Worcestershire, and if he must come to the county, we want him less in the Talbot.”

Timothy Boniface, host of the Talbot, groaned audibly. Here was Sir Robert Lygon demanding he should turn away a guest who traveled on the queen’s business and doubtless carried a pass signed by Sir Francis Walsingham, Secretary of State, himself. At the same time, Sir Robert was a gentleman of standing in the county and, moreover, a regular customer at the Talbot. What was a poor innkeeper to do? The decision was taken from him by Hoarfrost. He limped toward Sir Robert on his spindle shanks, his left shoulder creeping nearer to his ear.

“I’ll trouble you for your name, sir,” he said.

Sir Robert looked him up and down with such scorn in his eyes that Hoarfrost’s hand crept again toward his dagger.

“I think you forget your station. By what right do you demand a gentleman’s name? Take care, or I’ll have you whipped for your impertinence.”

Hoarfrost’s yellowed skin flushed a deep red.

“I would have you know, sir, that I represent Her Gracious Majesty in this county of Worcestershire, and so long as that is so, I can demand the name of any man — gentleman or popinjay.” Sir Robert

clapped a hand to the hilt of his sword. "By God, if you carried a sword, hunchback or no, I'd . . ."

Boniface placed a restraining hand on Sir Robert's arm.

"Please, Sir Robert," he said. "Not on the threshold of my inn. . ."

Benjamin Hoarfrost relaxed. "Ah — Sir Robert. I thought as much. You'll be Sir Robert Lygon, I don't doubt." He spoke quietly, remembering. "Yes, Sir Robert Lygon of Madresfield, of course. Landed gentleman and notorious recusant Papist. Have your fines been paid recently, Sir Robert? I must speak to the magistrates. Have you had any priests in that fine mansion of yours? I must call to find that out, mustn't I? Are you exchanging treasonable letters with those we won't name at this moment, Sir Robert? Doubtless the postboy can be — ah — persuaded to tell me about your correspondence."

Sir Robert spluttered with rage, while Timothy Boniface waved ineffectual hands in the air between the two men.

"For that you shall be whipped, you twisted upstart. Not here, where it might cause embarrassment to my friend the landlord, but put foot on my estates, and you shall be. That is, if I can find a kitchen boy willing to soil his hands on you."

Hoarfrost looked at Sir Robert with cold hatred, but without fear. "I have the queen's commission . . ." he began.

Sir Robert interrupted him. "That, my man, I take leave to doubt. That you have some orders from Mr. Secretary, or even from my Lord Burghley himself, I don't question. But from Her Majesty, no! I would have you understand that we are all loyal subjects in this county, and the queen knows it. Catholic and Protestant alike. But, mark you, we are loyal to Her Majesty, not to those swollen-headed tradesmen's sons who ill-advise her."

Sir Robert called to the hostler to bring his horse and, mounted, turned once more to Hoarfrost.

“I keep my word,” he said. “Come to Madresfield, and see what welcome awaits you. Yes, and bring your three footpads with you.” He clattered out of the Talbot yard.

Timothy Boniface, washing his hands in the air, led the way into the inn. Hoarfrost’s face was impassive as he followed, and in his mind he was revising the order of the Catholic Worcestershire gentlemen who were to receive his special attention. Sir Robert Lygon now occupied the first place jointly with another who had taken a horsewhip to him when Hoarfrost had tried to enter his house some years before. That gentleman’s name was Sir James Croome of Clifton-on-Teme and Sapey.

The three followers were surprised, after the scene they had witnessed in the inn yard, to hear Benjamin Hoarfrost chuckle as he mounted the stairs in the wake of the landlord. It was not a pleasant sound.

## Chapter 3

# The Secret Country

Nicholas Thorpe and Philip Topsham rode knee to knee through the increasing crowds as they neared the city of Worcester. It had been days since they had left York, and they were too excited at the new countryside and at their unknown future to pace sedately before the baggage wagons, as Sir James Croome and Nicholas's mother were doing.

So much had happened since that curious day in July when Nicholas had taken leave of his headmaster. First, there had been Nicholas's discovery that Mr. Greenleaf was a priest and that Mr. Greenleaf was not his name at all. His real name Nicholas preferred to forget in case it slipped out in front of those who must not know. The way of his discovery had been curious, too.

Less than a week after Nicholas had left school, he awakened very early in the morning — so early that only the faintest lightening in the east foretold the day to come. He was wide awake and eager for the free hours before him.

Then, unbidden, there had come into his mind the thought of the fish rising in the Ouse at dawn, and suddenly he wanted more than anything to sit on the banks, rod in hand, and think. It was almost twelve months since he had fished, and his rod would be . . . Where would it be? Of course — in the attic with his bow and blunted arrows, his hobby horse, and other discarded toys.

Nicholas flung his legs over the side of his bed and dressed quickly. Lightly, in stockinged feet, so that he would not disturb the maids, he ran up the steep upper staircase and pushed open the attic door. The hinges did not squeak as they used to, he noted, and as the door

opened, there emerged a murmur of voices. He eased the door open sufficiently to slip inside.

His mother was there, kneeling, and she put up a hand and pulled him down by her side. At the end of the room was a chest, and on it candles burned. A man was busy before it. Suddenly Nicholas realized it was Mr. Greenleaf, strangely clad in vestments, and — of course — he was saying Mass. Nicholas looked at his mother with raised eyebrows, but she was absorbed in her devotions, and the beads of a rosary slipped one by one through her fingers with a scarcely perceptible rattle. There were some of the servants in the room, too, and Sir James Croome was there quite near the makeshift altar. As Nicholas watched, he put out a hand and rang a little bell that gave a soft, sweet note. Philip was kneeling on the other side of the altar.

Nicholas forgot about his fishing, and when the Mass was over, he followed his mother downstairs.

“So now you know, my dear,” she said to him.

Then Mr. Greenleaf came in, in his ordinary clothes, put an arm around Nicholas’s shoulders, and drew him away to the room that had once been his father’s study.

As the sunny dawn brightened the room that August morning, Nicholas learned that his mother had returned to the Old Faith, and more surprising still, Mr. Greenleaf told him that she was going to marry Sir James Croome.

“She intended to tell you herself very soon,” Mr. Greenleaf said. “But as you stumbled on us this morning, it seems right that I should tell you now.”

Afterward, when breakfast was over, Sir James came to him and took him by the hand. “So you know, Nicholas,” he said. “I hope you

approve.” Then, with the sudden gay smile that won all men’s hearts, “I always wanted a ready-made son like you.”

It was almost noon and the daily dinner was over before Nicholas went fishing that day, and Mr. Greenleaf met him as he crossed the threshold and asked permission to go with him. The priest and the boy sat side by side on the riverbank watching the float, but Nicholas knew the fish would not bite until the sun began to near the horizon. So they talked, and Nicholas found himself telling Mr. Greenleaf all about the execution he had seen and all the conflicts it had aroused in his mind. He was glad of the rod. It gave him something to do with his hands.

He had caught no fish by the time they went home, but Mr. Greenleaf laughed and said that he had caught Nicholas.

After that, events had moved so rapidly that Nicholas could barely remember which came first. There had been his own conditional baptism and after, as he came out of the improvised chapel, Philip had grinned and whispered, “Papist.” His mother’s wedding followed soon after, and then there was the turmoil of packing and all the business of giving up the house in the Stonegate.

At first, the day of moving to Sir James’s house in Worcester-shire seemed impossibly far away. Then it was only a week, and, at last, suddenly, Nicholas awoke and found the wagons already loading in the Stonegate. The long ride began.

All the change and disturbance seemed over when Philip and Nicholas rode knee to knee in the busy streets of Worcester, and asked the way to Sir James’s house at Clifton of a man who lounged at a street corner at Worcester Cross. In fact, the change was not ended. It had only just begun. They drew rein on the bridge that spanned the river Severn and sat there for a moment, looking down on the brown water that flowed so calmly toward the sea.

“Are you going to like it here, in the Midlands, Philip?” Nicholas asked.

“I might ask if you are,” Philip answered.

“Of course. It’s going to be my mother’s home. It will be my home, too. Aren’t you excited, Philip? There’s so much to find out, and so much to explore. Think of it. Hundreds and hundreds of acres, and all of it belonging to my father. My new father, I mean. I don’t really remember much about my real father, you know. Do you think the farmers who are Sir James’s tenants will all be Catholics? Will it all be easy and comfortable and no worry about the pursuivants knocking at the door? Do you think so, Philip?”

“How can I tell? All I know is we’re crossing another river,” Philip said, and shook his reins and rode half a length ahead of Nicholas. His face was dark and his shoulders bowed. When Nicholas drew level with him, he stretched out a hand and laid it on the boy’s knee. They walked the horses side by side.

“How old are you now, Nicholas?” Philip asked.

“Fifteen,” Nicholas answered.

“Three years younger than I am,” Philip said slowly. “A lot can happen in three years when it’s the beginning of life.”

He was silent for a while until they turned into the road for Martley and Clifton and their backs were toward the river.

“It’s strange,” he said at last, “how you think of your own country in terms of the rivers. Up in Yorkshire, for you it was the Ouse and the Nidd. When you wanted peace and quietness, you went to these rivers. For me, in Devon, it seems that the Exe cuts my county in two. It’s happy and bright at Cowley, and then, when it gets past the countess’s weir, it’s sullen in its struggle with the sea.

So I’d rather have a little brook that winds its way down the valley past my home to run at last over the beach at Branscombe. Of course, it’s foolish of me, but it seems that the men who live on the

west of the river Exe are different from those on the east. When I went back to Devon after I left our school, everything was happy. Then one night, men came. I've never told you about this, Nicholas. They took my father, and soon after, they hanged him at Exeter for harboring priests. They sent my mother to prison in London. She's still there. While they were stripping the paneling in the house and tearing down the arras, two men with drawn swords in their hands stood over me as I lay in bed, and I did nothing."

"But there was nothing you could do, was there?"

"Perhaps not. I don't know. But I swore when they let me go, I'd do something to put that right. I don't mean revenge. I mean something to redress the balance. If you shelter a priest, as my father did, you die. Then let us have more and more priests. They can't hang all of those who help them. Nicholas, I want to do something about it. I mean, I want to do something more than I'm doing now. You see, when the pursuivants had taken my father and mother away, they left some of their men behind. I suppose they didn't take me because they thought I was too young to carry on my father's work. It made me mad to see them lounging in my father's chairs and spitting on the boards the maids had polished every morning."

"Couldn't you get rid of them?" Nicholas asked.

"I thought about it, of course, but what could I do? I might have gathered my father's tenants together — most of them are Catholics — and we could have driven the men away. If we'd done this, they'd have come back, bringing others with them. Then there'd have been cottages burning and dead tenants hanging from trees."

"They wouldn't do that, would they?" Nicholas said.

"*Wouldn't* do it? They *have* done it time and time again," Philip answered. "Anyway, I thought my first duty was to stop any priests coming to my father's house. I didn't know when the next priest would

come, but I knew the way he'd come. So very early one morning, I took what food I could and left Branscombe Hall."

"Weren't you afraid the men would follow you?"

Philip laughed. He was recovering his spirits. "They were still snoring like pigs when I left. I happened to leave the wine-cellar door open the night before. It didn't seem to matter to me. They'd have broken it down anyway when they finished the ale in the brewhouse. So off I went up into the hills and camped out. It was three days before a priest came."

"How did you sleep?" Nicholas asked.

"Oh, in a cave I know. It's a most exciting place. I used to play in it when I was a small boy. I took blankets with me, too. They're still there, in fact. The cave's quite near the path the priests use."

"It must have been awful just waiting there. Did you have to watch the path all the time?"

Philip laughed again. "No. You see, I had a little handbell in the cave. It was there for Dorothy. She was one of the maids when I was little. She used to bring me a picnic, and she would ring the bell to tell me it was there if she couldn't see me about. I hung the bell in a tree and tied a thread to it. Then I fixed the thread across the path about six inches from the ground so that anyone walking along the path would break the thread and make the bell swing. It nearly frightened the priest out of his wits when a bell began to ring suddenly just near his head."

"That was clever," Nicholas said.

"Well, it worked. Of course, I couldn't go very far away. But it gave me a chance to go down to the brook."

"The priest was grateful to you, I expect."

"I suppose so, but he was terribly upset. That sort of thing had been happening more and more often, he said. Anyway, he turned on his heel, and we went back to the inn where he'd left his horse, both of us. He wanted me to go back home, but I begged to go with him. I couldn't bear to live in Branscombe Hall with those men lounging about all day. He let me go with him in the end, with me riding pillion. We got to a little place called Chard the first day and stayed with a gentleman called Sir Edward North."

"He was a Catholic, I suppose?" Nicholas asked.

"Of course. He'd got a good idea, too. Joined to his house at the back was a sort of cottage where the gardener lived. Inside the cottage were two of everything. Two beds, I mean, and two of all the gardener's tools. Then, when a priest arrived, he changed into gardener's clothes. The real gardener, you see, used the tools alternately so that there were always two mattocks and so on, bright and shining. The pursuivants had been there, as a matter of fact, when a priest was, and never suspected a thing. Sir Edward North gave me a horse the next morning, and we went on to Bath."

"Did you get stopped on the way?"

"No, we didn't, as it happened," Philip said. "We had a story all ready though, in case we were. I was supposed to be an undergraduate at Oxford University, and the priest was my tutor. He had a paper to prove he was a Fellow of Magdalen College. Actually it was true; he had been before he was ordained. Then I had to carry a book in my doublet. Caesar's *Gallic Wars* it was. If there was anybody on the road, I had to take it out and read passages aloud. He asked me questions, all in Latin." Philip laughed. "Our old headmaster, Master Pullen, would have been proud of me, I can tell you. But for me, you can have all the Caesars and their wars. I don't want to hear of them again."

"No more do I," Nicholas said.

“Came in useful though, all that Latin we learned at school,” Philip said. “I never thought it would. I can’t say it shortened the journey, all the same. The priest seemed to enjoy it sometimes, but I think he was glad when we got to Hindlip Hall, near Worcester. I know I was. That’s where I met Sir James Croome, but you know about that.”

“Yes, he’s told me all about it. Hindlip’s a fine house, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it is, in a way. More full of priests’ holes than a pomegranate’s full of seeds. They were all made by Master Owen — Little John they call him — and he’s a wizard at it. I didn’t have time to see them all before your father came and asked me to go to Yorkshire with him. Actually, I was supposed to learn how to manage the estates when we got back to his house in Clifton, but I don’t know when I’m supposed to start work.”

“He’ll tell you when he’s ready,” Nicholas said, and the two rode in silence for a while. At last, Nicholas spoke his thoughts aloud. “I thought all the roads were watched to stop the priests traveling about.”

“Yes, they are. There’s generally somebody on the bridges, but they’re simple men mostly and grudge the time lost from their work. They’re not too particular, all of them.”

“On the bridges,” Nicholas said. “Is that another reason why you feel queer about rivers?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just foolishness of mine, I suppose. It happened that the men who came and took my father and mother were from Teignmouth and Dawlish. The other side of the river, see. Now we’ve just crossed the Severn. I wonder whether we’re on the wrong or the right side.”

“Well, I think this is the right side,” said Nicholas cheerfully. “Look, the country’s changing. We’re getting into hills. Just the other side of this village and we begin to climb. Come along, Philip.”

They shook their reins and cantered through Martley. The pensioners sitting outside the new-built almshouses in that village watched them go, and nodded and spoke to one another until the drumming of the hooves died away, and the old men resumed their dozing in the sunshine.

As the hill steepened, the pace of the young riders lessened and they allowed their horses to walk until they stopped to breathe them on the crest. In front of them, the road wound down steeply to the river Teme. In parts the banks were heavily wooded and the trees grew to the water's edge. Already some of the leaves were stained with russet and gold, but the stream still ran sparkling and clear, and the water meadows from which the woods had been cleared showed emerald in the sunlight.

"Another river to cross," Nicholas said and smiled at his friend.

"The Rubicon, perhaps," Philip said and began to walk his horse carefully down the steep and deeply rutted road.

Neither Philip nor Nicholas had the time to spare for conversation as they descended the road to the river Teme. In parts, the surface had been scoured by miniature waterfalls made by heavy rain cascading down the hillside, and it sloped perilously sideways toward the inland cliff that dropped sheer to the river. Where the gradient eased and dipped, the ground was still damp and scored by straining hooves and the iron-shod wheels of farm wagons. The horses demanded all their riders' attention. When they had splashed their way across the ford at the foot of the hill, Philip drew rein and held up his hand for Nicholas, riding a length behind to join him.

"Look up, Nicholas," Philip said, and waved his hand to indicate the wooded hills grouped over them. "This is a country a man must know before he can move about in it. There'll be paths in these woods that seem to lead down to the river, and then there'll be a little . . . a little — what did you call it in Yorkshire? I remember — a little 'foot-trod'

going to safety. I think I want to know these hills and forests. What do you say?"

Nicholas looked up at the shoulders of the hills that came down and jostled the running waters into new channels. He gazed at the empty water meadows and let his eye run up to where a bare down rose clear of the trees. It reached above the oaks and beeches as if it were glad to be free of the cloak of leaves, and on its summit, like a plume on a knight's helmet, were three pines.

"And if we get lost, there's a point for a rendezvous. The hill with the three pines. We should know it from miles away," Nicholas answered.

"Yes. Yes," Philip said. "I'm looking forward to knowing these hills and woods, and . . ." His eyelids creased in a smile. "And the rivers. I think it's a secret country."

"By Puck, you're dead right in that, master. Secret it is and secret it always has been."

The heads of Philip and Nicholas swung sharply to their left, and Philip's sword was naked in his hand. There was no one to be seen.

"Put up your sword, master," the voice continued. "There's nothing to be afearred of."

A man in a green doublet stepped from behind the tangle of a dense bramble bush. Over his shoulder was slung a crossbow, and ready for use was a quiver filled with bolts. But his hands were empty, and he held them out before him as he approached the two young men.

Philip sheathed his sword and smiled. "You have to be careful in these days of highwaymen and footpads, my friend," he said. "You might have been spitted on my rapier before we could talk."

The man in green laughed, throwing back his head and showing white teeth and the quivering tip of a pink tongue between them.

“Nay, nay, master,” he said. “You could have had a bolt buried in your breastbone long before you knew I was about.”

“That’s true,” Philip said and held out his hand. The man took it and grasped it firmly. “I’m Philip Topsham, and this is my friend and companion Nicholas Thorpe.”

The man removed his soft green bonnet and walked before the horses to the side of Nicholas. He reached out his right hand, and Nicholas took it in his. Nicholas felt that he held something live and vigorous and with the coiled strength of a steel spring.

“Reckon you’ll be Master Nicholas, the stepson of Sir James Croome. Son of the lady he married up in Yorkshire,” he said.

“Yes, but how do you know?” Nicholas asked.

“Don’t you worry about that.” The man showed his teeth again. They were startlingly white against the brown skin of his face. “The news comes. Quicker than you might think, my masters. The forest post you might call it. There ain’t much that goes on I don’t get to hear of. Well, Master Philip Topsham and Master Nicholas Thorpe, I bids you welcome to the free forests and woods of Worcestershire.”

“But,” Nicholas said, “I thought all the land around here belonged to my father — my stepfather, I mean: Sir James Croome.”

“Oh, ah,” the man in green said. “So it do, most of it, if you pays attention to names on bits of paper. But what you got to understand is that in these parts, Worcestershire or Herefordshire, makes no difference — we be free men. The landlord, lord o’ the manor, whatever you might like to call him, makes no difference neither. Either he’s with us or against us. As it happens, masters, Sir James is with us. So, natural-like, we’re with him, see?”

“Who are ‘we’?” Philip asked.

“Ah, that might well be a manner o’ speaking. It might just mean me. It just depends. On the other hand, it might mean me and me friends. Anyways, I bids you welcome, young masters. And when you meet me again — as you will — you might remember me name’s Tom. Tom Longbow, as a matter of fact. Funny that, considering this, here.” He patted the crossbow over his shoulder. “Bit silly, ain’t it, to carry this and be called Longbow?” He laughed, and his whole face lighted up, lifting the hearts of Philip and Nicholas with his happiness.

“Now, listen, masters,” Tom continued. “You’ll be making for Clifton. Ah, it’ll be warm and ready for you all. The maids have been busy these long days building fires and rubbing wax into the floors. Sir James won’t be long after you, as I well knows. I reckon him and his wagons’ll be just about crossing the bridge at Worcester at this very moment.”

“How do you know that?” Philip demanded.

“How can I tell you? Didn’t I say we have our ways and means? Trust me, you must.”

“I do,” Nicholas said impulsively.

“For that matter, so do I,” Philip added. “Although without any reason I can see.”

“Never mind,” Tom said. “Takes time to know who’s your friends and who isn’t. Any road, you’ll be going up to Clifton and the way’s steep. Mind if I walk between you? Maybe I can help, although the road’s plain enough. What d’you say?”

“Oh, yes . . .” Nicholas began.

“If it’s not out of your way . . .” Philip said at the same time.

Tom took the bridles of the two horses in his hands and led them into a narrow track, deep sunk between banked hedges, on his right.

“Looks, this does, like a private way, and so it was, times gone by. That was when the sumpters brought their mules up here. You wouldn’t know about that. Long before either of you was born. Any road, that don’t matter. It’s the easier way and not known to most of them what comes to Clifton. Few enough there are, too, but you may be sure they’d come by the other road. If they did know about this way, they wouldn’t use it. Too narrow, see? Easy to jump on a man’s back in this narrow way, ain’t it?”

Nicholas looked up into the hedgerows, heavy with olive-leaved brambles and marked with the purple-beaded fruit of blackberries. He saw only too clearly how easy it would be for a man to leap and fling an arm about his neck. Tom looked up at him with a twinkle in his eye. He was reading Nicholas’s thoughts.

“Now, don’t you worry, young master,” he said. “Maybe they’d do it, maybe not. Not when Tom’s with you, they wouldn’t. Not they! Now look! There’s the spire of the church. Funny, isn’t it, how it looks just the same as it always did? Next to it’s the inn. Kept by a friend of mine by the name of Joe Thompson. Knew his father, I did, when I was a boy. He remembered when the monks used to come up from Sapey for a barrel of wine. Times is different. That’s right, ain’t it, Master Philip Topsham?”

“If you’re asking me whether times are different, I must say they are. But then, they always have been. Different from what, anyway, Tom?” Philip looked down on Tom with the birth of affection in his eyes. Tom plodded on in silence for a time. When he spoke again, he chose to ignore Philip’s remark.

“Then next to the inn is Sir James’s house.” He glanced up at Nicholas this time. “You can step straight through his door from the high road. And behind it is the paddock, and from there you can look across the valley to the Abberley Hills in the east. Years ago, or so I’ve heard tell, a Welsh army got lost there and wandered about until . . . Oh, well, no man ever got back. You could trap an army there now. Then,

from the front, you've only got to step over the road to see the Malverns and the deep valley of the Sapey. Then, far away, there's the Black Mountains of Wales. All the villages are hidden, and there are cottages you'd never dream of finding."

He turned his head and looked up at Philip. "A secret country," he said, and finished speaking.

The three — the two riders and the man on foot — plodded on until they came to the point where their way joined the more obvious track that climbed from the ford across the river Teme. They stopped and looked from the ridge on which Clifton was built over the land Tom had described.

"Yes," Nicholas said. "It's as you said, Tom."

He found himself, to his surprise, again addressing the man they had met so strangely, by his Christian name. And he was doing it quite naturally.

Philip said, "It was I who called it a secret country. Down there by the ford."

"Yes," Tom said. "You said it, master. But I knew it before you put it into words. Remember it, that's all I ask. One of these days I might show you some of its secrets. Now to Sir James's house, and there I'll take my leave of you."

Tom jerked gently on the horses' bridles, and they moved on. Nicholas noted as they passed the church that it seemed neglected and the grass was knee high among the moss-grown tombstones.

"Pity," Tom said, displaying again his uncanny knack of reading his companions' thoughts. "That's different too." His eyes slid sideways and upward to Philip. "The only thing that's left of the old days is the knight. He's still lying there in what used to be the Lady Chapel with his knees crossed. Went on a crusade, he did."

His name, too, was Sir James Croome. Pity! He might have waited a few centuries and the crusade would have come to him."

"Tom," Nicholas said impetuously, "I believe you're a — a Papist. I believe you're one of us."

Tom looked up at the boy with a sudden flash of white teeth.

"I'm your friend," he said, and fumbled underneath his doublet. "Look! Here's a silver whistle. Keep it, boy. We shall meet many times in peace and war, and I shall be on your side. But maybe there'll be a day when you want me quickly. If that day comes, use this." He dangled the whistle on its cord before Nicholas. "If I don't hear it, someone will. And remember, we're free men in this country, to do what we know is right."

Tom Longbow released the horses' bridles and settled his weapon comfortably on his shoulder. When he spoke again, his voice had acquired more of the Worcestershire burr.

"Reckon about now Sir James is getting near the steep hill down to the Teme. Might have trouble with them heavy wagons. I'll be on my way. Be able to lend a hand, maybe. Likes to be neighborly, I do."

He stepped lightly across the highway into a belt of trees. As he passed into the dappled shade, his green doublet was visible for a moment, and then was gone. It might have been that he had never existed.

At the very moment when Tom Longbow disappeared between the trees, a man who had lounged at the corner of Worcester Cross was reporting to Benjamin Hoarfrost in the Talbot that two young men had asked the way to Sir James Croome's house in Clifton.

A letter lay on the table before Hoarfrost. In it was nothing more than an inventory of the goods that had been taken from Mistress Thorpe's house in the Stonegate, York, for delivery to Clifton-on-Teme. The

letter was addressed to Sir James Croome, and the seal had been expertly detached. Benjamin listened to the report of his agent, grunted, glanced at the letter again, and flung it into the fire.

Hoarfrost leaned his head on his hands in thought. He was still sitting, bowed over the table in the Worcester inn, as the York-shire wagons toiled up the last steep slope to Sir James's house in Clifton.

## Chapter 4

### Village of the Dead

For a time after the arrival in Clifton of Sir James and his lady, all was chaos in the house. Men and maids scurried here and there, followed by Nicholas's mother, who was trying to settle in her new home and still keep about her the household treasures she had loved in York.

Sir James was busy riding over his broad acres and wished to be alone. Nicholas and Philip found little to do. All the time, the countryside was slowly changing. The deep greens of the woods were slowly turning to a mixture of olive and brown, and every morning the gullies in the cowshed were choked with more dead leaves.

One evening, at the beginning of October, when the dishes had been cleared from the table and the jars of wine and the bowls of sweetmeats had been set in their place, Sir James called the two youths to sit on either side of him. Candles were mirrored in the polished oak, and flames from the burning logs on the hearth leaped and died so that, at one moment, the room was full of light and the rectangles of the paneling were picked out sharply, and the next, all the walls and corners were in shadow.

"Philip," Sir James said, "we shall have to change our plans as far as you are concerned. I thought it would be a good thing for you to stay with me and learn something about managing the estates. This, it seemed to me, might stand you in good stead when you went back to your own place, but the situation has changed. I learned today that your mother will be released from her prison on the payment of fifteen hundred pounds."

"Fifteen hundred pounds!" Philip said. "It's an enormous sum! How can it be found?"

“It can be found, but only by selling part of your father’s land. That’s not all. If your mother is to live in peace at Branscombe Hall, she must agree to pay one-fifth of her income to the Treasury every year, and the minimum sum has been stated. What the government calls a fifth looks to me more like a third. That means that someone — you, I suppose — must look after the estate very carefully.”

“I’ll do my best, of course, Sir James,” Philip said. “I had begun to learn about it before — before they killed my father. But it won’t be easy.”

“It won’t, that’s quite sure. I heard all about this from a good friend of mine, my lord Northcott. He is, I dare say, the staunchest Catholic in your county, and he will do everything he can to help.”

“I know he would, sir,” Philip said.

“I think, myself, all the same, that you might be wise to consider selling all your land and going overseas with your mother.”

“Oh, no, sir. I couldn’t do that. It’s not only that it was my father’s land, and my grandfather’s, and his father’s, back longer than anyone knows. There are the tenants as well. They were my father’s friends,” Philip said.

“I think many of my tenants are my friends, but I can’t know until they are put to the test,” said Sir James.

“I’m sure they would stand by me, sir,” Philip said.

“Perhaps. I don’t know. When a man risks losing his livelihood, he’s not always easy to move, even for the sake of his religion. You must remember, too, that the government’s administrator is still living in your house, and he’ll stay there until your mother gets back. Do you know who he is?”

“No, sir,” Philip said. “But I can guess what he is.”

“He’s a creature of Mr. Secretary of State. He was once one of Sir Francis Walsingham’s footmen,” Sir James said bluntly.

At that moment, the flames leaped in the hearth. Sir James saw the young man clearly. He was seated on his stool with every muscle tensed and with his jaw clenched. His fingers rapped on the table and then wound themselves together so that the knuckles showed white.

“You have to be patient, Philip,” Sir James said gently.

“That’s all very well, sir,” Philip said. “But the villagers at Branscombe will be robbed of all they possess. I must get back. You see, they’re only small farmers and fishermen. They looked to my father for everything.”

“You mean they will now look to you? Can you be their leader, Philip?” Sir James asked.

“I can but try, sir. My mother will help, of course.”

“Yes,” Sir James said thoughtfully, and his fingers played, in the small silence, with the stem of his wine glass. “Your mother will help when she gets home. You must remember, of course, that even when Mistress Topsham comes back, it doesn’t mean there won’t be pursuivants and their men in the village.”

“I haven’t forgotten it. We can’t stop them from levying the recusancy fines. Those are legal, however unfair they are. What we can do is stop the bullying. We can try, at least, to stop the pursuivants from taking money for themselves by threatening men with imprisonment. There’s no law enforcing that,” Philip said.

“I have an idea Mistress Topsham might be better at that than you will be.” Sir James smiled gently in the candlelight. “In any case, nothing can be done until she is home, and that will be some weeks. Neither you nor your mother will want a forced sale.”

“But she’s in prison, sir. We must get her out quickly,” Philip said.

“Of course,” Sir James answered. “But you can set your mind at rest about her for the moment. My lord Northcott tells me it has been possible to get a little money to her, so she is well fed, although she hasn’t her liberty. She is among Catholics in the prison, too. So I ask you to be patient for a little while, as my lord has asked your mother. In the meantime, I want you to learn something about a scheme we have here. It was Longbow’s idea in the first place — you’ve met him, I understand — and Sir Robert Lygon and I are doing everything we can to help it along. You, too, Nicholas, can help.”

“I shall love to, Sir James,” Nicholas said. “Both Philip and I have wanted something to do.”

Sir James Croome smiled affectionately at the boy. “You’ll have plenty. Well, briefly, the idea is to make a safe place in this district for priests to come to. First, of course, we have to get the priests into the country, and where better than through the tiny Devon harbors? With Branscombe Hall free of government spies, we might be able to use it to receive priests coming into this country, at least for a few weeks. The coast around there is full of little harbors that are known only to Devon men. Isn’t that so?”

“Yes. And I know them all,” Philip answered. “When I was a very small boy I used to go out with the fishermen . . .”

Sir James interrupted him. He was speaking aloud his own thoughts.

“With this gateway into England, we could then organize a way to bring the priests up here into the Midlands. Make the Midlands, so to speak, a center from which they would go all over the country. This is the only way by which we can hold the Catholics together.”

Nicholas had been following the conversation with his eyes sparkling. He could not contain his thoughts any longer.

“Why the Midlands, Sir James?” he asked. “In Yorkshire, there are so many Catholics . . .”

Sir James laughed. “There spoke my Yorkshire son. Because, Nicholas, here in Worcestershire, almost all the great houses are owned by us. And also because the Midlands live up to their name. They are in the middle of England. And also because there is already an organization . . .”

Sir James was silent for long moments. He sat quietly in his carved armchair, and the only sound in the room was the gentle crumbling of the logs on the hearth. He rose silently to his feet and tiptoed to the door. He stood with his hand on the latch while an owl called from the woods outside. Suddenly he flung the door open. The hall onto which the door opened was empty. Sir James returned to his seat.

“You see,” he said, “we can’t ever be sure. We must take every precaution. We’ve been here for some weeks, and everything seems quiet and peaceful. Pray that it stays like this.”

Briskly he rubbed his hands together. Nevertheless, when he spoke his voice was low.

“When we can get the priests here, we must have somewhere for them to live and somewhere for them to be taught about conditions in England. The houses, like this and Madresfield, or the others, are impossible except for a short time or in emergencies. Priests like Mr. Greenleaf ” — he turned and smiled at Nicholas — “we can accommodate in our houses for the night or two they are with us. It’s the others, the newcomers, who must have a center — a headquarters, so to speak. This is where you two can help.”

He stopped and looked at each of the boys in turn and waited as if he wanted them to speak.

Philip and Nicholas leaned forward and gazed at Sir James. Their answer lay in their shining eyes.

“Right! Tomorrow morning early you must go out and cross the highway. Go down the lane on your left until you come to the little hill they call the Knowle. Wait there. And go on foot. You’ll meet someone you already know.”

“I can guess,” Nicholas said. “Tom Longbow.”

“Yes. Tom Longbow. He’ll show you some of the secrets of this countryside. And remember, not a word of this to anyone.”

“What about my people in Devon, sir?” Philip asked.

“That, too, will come in time. Be patient.”

Sir James rose to his feet and snuffed out one of the candles. “Sleep well,” he said. “You’ll have a hard day tomorrow if I know Tom Longbow.”

He laid a hand briefly on Nicholas’s head so that it felt to the boy like a priest’s blessing, and went from the room.

In the dim light of one candle, Nicholas and Philip looked at one another. Philip stretched a hand over the polished board. Nicholas reached out and took it in his. Without a word spoken, they pledged faith to one another. Together they made their way to the wide staircase and up to the room they shared.

Outside in the chill autumn air, a man, half-concealed behind the massive trunk of an oak, watched the candlelight disappear from the parlor, noted the brief illumination in hall and on staircase, and stood for a quarter of an hour after the whole house was in darkness. He turned away to trudge the eight weary miles into Worcester to make another negative report to his master, Benjamin Hoarfrost. There was nothing to look forward to, he thought, but endless watching and spying. And at the end of it, a tramp along a lonely road with the prospect of no reward but curses at the end of it. The game wasn’t

worth the candle. There wasn't any sign of the rich pickings he'd been promised. For two pins he'd just disappear . . .

At the moment the thought was in the spy's mind, he was passing beneath the shadow of the great yew that overhung the wall of the unkempt churchyard. In faint moonlight, the tombstones showed a ghostly white, leaning together as if they were sharing their spirit secrets. The man looked over his shoulder, shuddered, and turned his eyes once more toward the glimmer of the riband of road. A green-clad arm reached out from the shadows and took him about the neck. Then the road was empty in the moonlight.

Any wakeful villager hearing the slight sound that came from the spy would have taken it for the cough of a ewe and thought of it no more.

The sun was just clear of the Abberley Hills in the east when Nicholas and Philip emerged from the door of Sir James Croome's house. The men from the cottages had already left their homes to work in the fields, and the village street was deserted. But from house, cottage, and dairy came little sounds that made up a hum of life being lived happily within doors. In the house of Sir James, a maid sang as she worked, a clang of iron pails sounded from a nearby cottage, and from an outhouse, a churn thumped rhythmically. Nicholas strolled with Philip the few yards to the hillock called the Knowle.

The summit of the little hill was bare except for a massive oak that had already begun to spill its acorn bounty over the short turf. Philip leaned a hand on its trunk and gazed over the wide lands to the west and south. He pointed.

"Look, Nicholas, the three pines," he said. "Our landmark."

"Yes," Nicholas answered. "And it's on the other side of the river Teme. It looks no more than a bowshot away."

A soft chuckle startled them. Tom Longbow appeared from behind the oak tree's bole.

“That’s the trouble with this country. The air’s clear, see, and distances hard to judge. That clump of pines is all of five mile away. Not an hour and a half ’s walk, and no more would it be if you could go straight from here to there. But you can’t. And for why? Because there’s the deep valley of the Teme in the way, and the winding valley of the Sapey. The Sapey’s no more than a brook, you might say, and you’d be right. A man can ford it most anywhere. But before you can ford it, you’ve got to get to it, and that’s not so easy. Hillsides steeper’n the pitch of a cottage roof, and it’s not only that. There’s many of them it looks possible to climb down going from birch to birch, but try it and what happens? Suddenly the ground crumbles beneath your feet and you’ve started a landslide. ’Course, the place is ’oneycombed with conies. Proper ’oneycombed it is.

“A year or more ago, there was a youngster from the village thought a couple o’ conies’d come in handy for his mother’s pot. So off he goes with his snares in his pocket on his way down to the Sapey. Now, mind, he was a boy who’d been about these parts all his life, so he ought to have known his way about. So he did really, but he was unlucky. Got to a big warren near the Sapey when this very thing happened to him.”

“Was he killed?” Nicholas asked.

“As it happened, no,” Tom said. “In that he was lucky. It chanced that I was down by the Sapey, getting some of the little trout that shines like rainbows and makes good eating, when suddenly the water level starts to fall. Then, when the shallows had shrunk to no more than a trickle, what water there was left begins to run red.”

“Was it blood?” Nicholas asked.

Tom laughed. “No. ’Twas the color of good Worcestershire marl, so I knew a lot of soil had fallen into Sapey and dammed her up. ’Course, this happens now and then, natural-like, and she clears it herself, but sometimes she’s glad of a helping hand, so off I goes to see. When I

gets there, there he was, this youngster, with nothing of him to be seen but his head. The water where the soil had dammed it up was just lapping 'round his chin. His mouth was opening and shutting like a Wye salmon lying on the bank. Made me laugh, it did."

"But you saved him, Tom, didn't you?" Nicholas asked.

"Had him out in no time, and give him me trout to take the place of the conies he hadn't caught."

Philip looked shrewdly at Tom. "Doesn't sound the sort of country for strangers to be about in," he said.

Tom looked equally shrewdly back at him. "Ah. Thought you might take me meaning. 'Course, it's all right when you know your way about, but you *must* know."

"Isn't that what we're here for?" Nicholas asked.

"That's right," Tom said. "But first you takes a Worcestershire welcome." He smiled his happy smile and brought a hand from behind his back. It was filled with the fattest, juiciest blackberries Nicholas had ever seen.

The mouths of Nicholas and Philip were stained black when Tom said, "The time's come when we might have a look at the country. Mist's going rapid now the sun's well up. Come with me."

He led them to the edge of the hillock. The ground fell away from it on all sides except where the village clustered comfortably on its ridge, behind them.

"Look," Tom said. "I must tell you about these parts." He pointed to his right, where the last wisps of autumn-morning fog still drifted above the trees. "Down there's the old null. It's not used now as often as it used to be, but it'd be a sorry day for this village and others about if it wasn't there. I'll take you to it one o' these days. The point

is you can open the sluice gates and, if you do, the Sapey's in spate, so to speak, and she becomes a torrent."

"Would the water wash away any dams that had fallen into the river?" Nicholas asked.

"Ain't a river," Tom answered. "But a bright young stream all the same. Ah, it would do that. Might make a proper mess of any plans you'd got to cross her. However, that ain't the point. What I want you to understand is what you'll find as you come downstream. First there's the church."

"A church? Down there?" Philip said.

"Ah, a church. And built by the Normans! That's a year or two ago. Built, it was, to serve a village, and there was seven or eight monks looked after it."

"Monks?" Nicholas said. "Then it must have been a monastery."

"No, not exactly," Tom replied. "They had a house with all comforts, you might say, and the church hard alongside it. The monks looked after the village as well as the church."

"But there's a church in this village," Philip said. "Why did they want another?"

"We're talking about different villages. Down there in Sapey Valley there was another village. Bigger than Clifton it was, too. People in it kept themselves apart, or so I've heard say. Then something happened. Everybody got ill. The Black Death, they called it, and everybody in the village died."

"But Tom," Philip said, "the Black Death was more than 200 years ago. Nearer 250."

“Ah, so I believe it was. Didn’t stop the people dying, though. There it was, as nice a little village as you could find, with the cottages clustered ’round Sapey Brook. Then, in a matter of a few weeks, it was a village of the dead.

“There wasn’t a family left alive, so they say, and the monks caught the plague, too. All of them died, except one. He was left alone, and after he’d buried the last of the villagers, he went mad. People up here in Clifton used to hear the church bell ringing wildly sometimes. Night or day made no difference, and they knew it was the mad monk of Sapey. They still talk about it on winter nights in the inn when the fire’s burning bright and the curtains are drawn. Then some of them don’t want to go home.”

The brown face of Tom Longbow was brooding and serious as he gazed down over the meadows to the place where the clustered trees marked the beginning of the Sapey Valley. The two young men were silent, thinking of the tragedy two and a half centuries old.

“Ah, stands to reason,” Tom continued. “Nobody went near that village for a time for fear of the Black Death. Then, after, it got a name for being haunted, and nobody went because of that. Some funny things happen down there still, as I well know. The houses began to fall down, and the ways in decayed, and the whole valley got the way it is now, neglected and, in a way, rotten.”

“Is it still deserted?” Nicholas asked. “Doesn’t anyone live there now?”

“Only a few, and they’ve got some special reason for wanting to keep out of the way. None of them has been there very long. One man took over the monks’ house. It was in better repair than most, but even now there’s only part of the roof on. That’s right alongside the old church. Then there’s my cottage. That’s sound enough, with good solid walls, and I thatched it meself. There’s two or three others in houses they’ve codged up where the valley widens and the old village

green used to be. Leastways that's what it looks like. After that, the Sapey goes into a gorge she's cut herself, I reckon, and beyond that there's the river Teme. Ah, it's secret country all right."

"Did you say those who live there have got some special reason for wanting to keep out of the way?" Philip said.

Tom turned his sharp eyes on Philip. "Ah, I did. But you don't go asking what them reasons are, young master. If you meet any of them, and you may if things go right, and they choose to tell you, that's another matter. You just got to take my word there ain't nothing to be ashamed of. Leastways, not much, and they're good friends to me and will be to you if you'll let 'em, even if they only show it by keeping out of sight and their eyes and mouths shut."

"Does the valley belong to my stepfather?" Nicholas asked.

"No. Strange, that is. Sir James's land stops where the banks begin to drop steep down to the valley. All the brook and the banks and the woods belonged to the old lord, and he got mixed up in the rising in the north in '69. Lost his head because of it, he did. Where the young lord is, nobody knows. Overseas anyway. Rome, or somewhere. Nobody's seen him for years. Well, that's enough talk about it. I'll take you to see some of it. But mark what I say. Follow me close, and when I signal you to be silent, not a sound!"

Tom chuckled, settled his crossbow comfortably on his shoulder, and swung away across the meadow. He jumped a ditch onto a rutted cart track that wound between the village fields and set off along it at a steady lope. Philip and Nicholas followed close behind.

As they walked, the track became less marked and ended abruptly in a dense thicket of hawthorns and bramble. The tangle of thorns and undergrowth stretched to right and left and seemed to form a rough unkempt hedge to the strips of field cultivated by the inhabitants of Clifton. Tom stopped abruptly.

“Any stranger might think this was the end of the road, and that’s just what he would be intended to think,” he said. “ ’Course, you could cut your way through the brambles, given time, but it wouldn’t do you much good if you did. The other side’s steep and thick with young trees. Nobody could force their way through that. Now come with me.”

Tom turned to his right and skirted the thicket. The rough grass that grew to its edge was crisscrossed by tiny beaten paths made by the rabbits on their nightly forays into the cultivated fields. The ground was thick with their droppings.

“You want to be careful, when you use this way into the valley, not to leave a track that’s plain for anybody to see,” Tom said.

Suddenly before them was a fold in the ground, and as the three stepped into it, they became invisible to men in the fields. The tangled undergrowth fell over the side of the cleft like a frozen green waterfall. Tom slipped between two of the six-foot-high bushes and was lost to view. Philip and Nicholas followed and found themselves on a narrow path that wound between the brambles and gave unexpectedly onto a yard-wide grassy walk. Tom stopped again. He beckoned his companions forward. Cautiously they peered over the edge of the green path and looked down a sheer escarpment. Below them they could see the topmost twigs of tall trees.

“Back there,” Tom said, gesturing to his left. “This way gets narrower and narrower and just disappears. A nasty place in the dark. There’s no way down the cliff in front, as you can well see. Now look.”

He rounded a corner to his right, and there, sloping over the edge of the inland cliff, lay a long-dead beech. Its bare roots pointed skyward like warning fingers from among the brambles. Its trunk, naked of bark and bleached by many summers, sloped down at a perilous angle to where its more slender end rested in the topmost crutch of an oak that was rooted in the forest floor many feet below. Tom

jumped onto it and ran lightly over the airy bridge until he was safely in the oak. Then he turned and ran back again.

“Now look,” he said. “This is the easiest way into the valley near to Clifton. If you don’t like it, nobody’s going to think the worse of you. We’ll just go back to another way in, although it’s a goodish step. If you want to try it and walk, just keep your eye fixed on the crutch of the oak you’re making for. Don’t look down. Of course, you can sit on it like a horse and shuffle along. That’s what I do meself when the light’s failing.”

“I can do it,” Philip said. “Brought up on Devon Cliffs, I was, robbing sea gulls’ nests, but I don’t know about Nicholas.”

“Who ran across the top of a ruined wall of St. Mary’s Abbey in York with the stones swaying underneath him? And got whipped for doing it?” Nicholas asked indignantly.

“All right,” Tom said. “I’ll go first and be ready for you at the other end.”

He ran lightly over the tree-trunk bridge once more and turned and called to the others to follow. Philip went next, stepping more slowly and cautiously than Tom, and reached the oak without a tremor. Nicholas held firmly in his mind the idea that he was walking over a plank that merely bridged a puddle, fixed his eye on the oak, and began to cross. A moment later, Tom’s hand was on his arm. The way down the ladder of the oak was easy with Tom’s hand and voice to guide and encourage. From the oak tree’s bole a faint but discernible path led toward where a babble of waters marked the passage of the Sapey Brook.

The path wound through the tangle of the forest, where self-set saplings had died or still struggled for survival, robbed of light and nourishment by their towering parents, until, at the edge of a bright-green treeless dell, it divided to right and left. Tom stopped again and pointed into the glade.

“Looks pretty, don’t it? But it ain’t. That there’s a bog. It ain’t one of those where you sink in in a matter of seconds, but once in, it’s terrible hard to get out. This spring you could just see the white bones of a sheep’s head sticking up, but how she got here’s more than I could say. It’s gone now. The safe path’s ’round to the left. The one to the right leads straight into the bog. Made it meself, I did. Thought it might come in handy sometime.” He laughed shyly as if he were admitting his own foolishness.

A moment later they were in the green tunnel of the Sapey with a narrow strip of blue sky overhead and at their feet the clear waters of the brook rippling over sunken stones and swirling in deep pools where arched roots of trees stretched half-naked from the bank.

Tom slapped from stone to stone over the water and climbed the opposite bank where outcrops of rock made an irregular stairway. The Sapey cascaded in a series of waterfalls, splashing over red rocks by the side of the three as they climbed. At last they came to a clear circle of land half-bounded by the waters and half by woods terraced like the sides of a Roman amphitheater. In the midst stood the sturdy structure of a little Norman church, roofed and buttressed and apparently unchanged by its centuries of loneliness. Near to it was a low and rambling timbered house, with its roof half-covered by a deep thatch.

Tom led the way to the heavy iron-studded oaken door of the church, bleached with five centuries of sun and rain, and laid against the wall his crossbow and quiver with his soft bonnet on top of them. The hinges protested as Tom forced the door open, but Nicholas noted they had been recently repaired. Tom saw his glance and nodded.

“Ah, we looks after the place as much as we can, but it’s a priest ought to be here. Well, we’ll see,” he said.

Inside, the floor was swept clean, but in the niches and on the altars the soft fine dust of ages lay. The three moved into the empty nave

on tiptoe and genuflected, although two and a half centuries had passed since the host was elevated there. They stood in silence, surrounded by a quietness that was emphasized by the rushing of Sapey waters outside. Nicholas saw that someone had placed on the chancel step a stone jar in which the glory of goldand-bronze autumn beech leaves blazed.

They left the church, over which the spirits of long-dead monks seemed to brood, and made their way down the Sapey Brook. There was no certain road, and Nicholas tried hard to memorize the landmarks by which Tom Longbow knew when to pass from one bank to another. Sometimes they crossed by half-submerged stepping stones, sometimes they splashed their way through shallows, and once they traveled over the waters by means of a rickety bridge that swayed so perilously that they made use of it one at a time. From that point, the banks rose precipitously and they climbed, leaving the water below confined and rushing in a deep trench.

As the way wound upward, the trees grew more sparse until at last, on the summit of an isolated hill, Nicholas glimpsed the three sentinel pines beyond the Teme. Then the path descended again and swept in a wide curve to avoid a little tributary that flowed through marshy ground to join the Sapey.

After a few hundred yards more, they stood at what had been the center of the community life of the dead village. The land leveled, and the outlines of the former village green were easily discernible. Through its midst the Sapey flowed, and the stone piers that had once supported the timbers of a series of little low bridges could be seen. All around the unkempt and overgrown open space, the ruins of cottages stood. Some were little more than heaps of stones, others had kept the outlines of homes, with sturdy stone walls still standing and chimneys probing upward, although the roofs had gone.

A little remote from the ruins that bordered the green stood the remains of a larger house and behind it, a small distance away, what

looked like an artificial mound. Tom began to lead the way toward it, but stopped in the middle of the green where, perhaps, had the village lived, a maypole might have stood.

“It’s a funny thing about this place how all these houses were built of stone,” he said. “There’s no mud and wattle here like you see up in Clifton. In fact, the monks’ house up there by the church is nearest to it. Do you notice that, young masters? That’s what makes me think the tales are right what the old men tell. They say it was different people lived here, different from the rest of the county. Do you think that might be?”

“You’re right,” Philip said. “Down in Devon, it’s all cob walls. Here in Worcestershire, it’s half-timbering. Where did the stone come from?”

“That’s easy,” Tom said. “The quarry’s up beyond the old mill. It’s the only place where there’s stone like this.”

“But, of course,” Nicholas put in. “They must have been Yorkshiremen. Up there we always build in stone.”

Philip laughed with Tom, and they went on toward the ruins of the larger house. In the shadow of the great chimney breast in the south wall, Tom put a finger to his lips and beckoned the others to follow him to the mound that appeared to be at the end of what was once a garden. In the summit of the mound was a wooden trap door, quite new, and secured with a beam running through iron staples. Tom took a fallen stone from among the long grass and rapped three times sharply on the trap door.

Immediately a voice cried from underneath, “Who’s there? Let me out! Let me out!”

Nicholas’s mouth grew round, and his eyes opened wide. Tom turned and put his finger to his lips again. He did not speak until they were once more on the village green.

“That there’s an icehole,” he said. “In the winter, they’d gather ice and snow and pack it in there. It’s brick-lined so it would keep frozen in the summer.”

“But there was a man inside,” Nicholas said.

“Ah, in a manner of speaking you’re right. He’s a spy. I took him last night outside Sir James’s house. Had me eye on him some time, I ’ad. He never knew who took him, and when he came to himself, he was blindfolded. Then I brought him here, and a long way ’round it was with a blindfolded man with his hands tied behind his back.”

“But he’ll starve to death,” Nicholas said.

“Not him! I shall let him go tomorrow or thereabouts and take him out of the valley in the dark. Reckon he’ll have had time to think in there. P’raps he’ll have seen the error of his ways. Anyway he won’t be anxious to come spying ’round these parts again. That’s one less.”

“But it must be horrible shut up in there,” Nicholas said.

“Not so horrible as standing on a scaffold. That’s where the priest would have been if the spy had seen him, and there’s one due at Sir James’s about now.” Suddenly Tom threw back his head and laughed, showing his white teeth. “Any road, he ain’t lonely in there. He’s got company.”

“Why? Who’s with him?” Philip demanded.

“ ’Tain’t who. It’s what. He’s got the old monk. The last of them, or so I reckon. Anyway it’s a skeleton with a brass crucifix lying on his ribs.”

## Chapter 5

### Lady with a Whip

Timothy Boniface of the Talbot Inn, Worcester, warmed his hands at the glowing ash in his wide fireplace. Rain lashed the leaded windowpanes, and occasional drops spattered down the chimney and hissed into the fire. The wind moaned drearily about the clustered roofs of the city. The Indian summer of 1585 was over, and the innkeeper sighed at the prospect of long, cold, dark days ahead. The cathedral clock, just over the way, boomed out the hour of eleven.

The innkeeper heaved his bulk from the corner of the settle, and cocked his head on one side to listen for sounds from above. There was a low murmur of voices and a stool scraped on the bare boards of the room upstairs.

“That Master Hoarfrost,” he muttered to himself. “Don’t like the look of ’e. Never did and never shall. And it ain’t no good saying otherwise.” He spoke pugnaciously, as if there were a company of his customers gathered in the empty room, all anxious to contradict him. He listened again to the rumble of voices. He could distinguish the staccato cough and acid tones of Hoarfrost from the deeper tones of the men he had brought with him.

“Come to think on it, one of the men ’asn’t been ’ere for a time. Reckon ’e’ll be asking for summat off the score. What a life! Who’d keep an inn? No more customers on a night like this, sure that is. Might as well lock up.” He waddled away to lock and bolt the front door of the inn.

Boniface’s hand was stretched out for the lock when the door burst open in his face, sending him staggering back against the wall.

“Holy Mother of . . .” he began, and wheezed himself into a fit of coughing to cover his revealing oath. A man, whose clothes dripped water over the flagstones pushed roughly past him and made for the fire.

“Wine,” the man croaked hoarsely.

Boniface slammed the door and turned the great iron key in the lock. When all was secure, he waddled into his parlor and lifted a candle to peer into the newcomer’s face.

The man’s hair was lank and plastered down with rain on his dirty forehead. His chin was smudged black with three days’ growth of beard, and the bristles rasped against the ruin of his collar as he moved his neck. His doublet was torn and muddy, and his ragged netherstocks pleated around his ankles. A pool of water had dripped from his sodden clothing to make a puddle around his feet. Already the water and the man were beginning to steam in the heat from the banked hot ashes.

“Master Hoarfrost’s man!”

“Wine,” the man said hoarsely again. “And food. Quick!” Boniface backed out of the room, unable to take his eyes from the scarecrow before the fireplace.

Upstairs in the little private room, Hoarfrost stopped speaking. He was listening hard, and when one of the two men seated before him shuffled on his stool, Hoarfrost turned on him a baleful glare that froze the man into immobility.

“Someone’s just come in. See who it is,” Hoarfrost said and nodded to the man nearer to the door.

The messenger’s oath when he saw his companion made the innkeeper’s words pale into insignificance.

“Where you been?” he added. “Better get upstairs quick.” He jerked his thumb upward. “He ain’t in too good a temper.”

The tattered and rain-soaked minion of Hoarfrost emptied his cup of wine, refilled it, and poured the contents down his throat. He took a hunk of bread from the innkeeper’s tray and, with it clenched in his grimy fist, followed his fellow upstairs.

Hoarfrost looked his ragged assistant up and down as if he took exquisite pleasure in his appearance. “Incompetent fool!” He spoke softly, but with a deadly venom in his voice. “Not only do you fail in your work with your ‘nothing to report’ night after night, but you fall into a briar patch. Or did Sir James Croome set his hounds on you and toss you into the Severn?”

The man gulped down a mouthful of half-chewed bread and a torrent of words poured from him. Hoarfrost sat hunched over the table listening, never taking his eyes from the speaker’s face. Occasionally his nostrils twitched as the dank smell of warm wet clothing and steaming unwashed body filled the room. At last the story of the man’s adventures came to an end. Hoarfrost coughed and hawked.

“So I was wrong,” he said. “Not an incompetent fool, but a very gallant fool, it seems. You were attacked by twelve burly ruffians. Are you sure it wasn’t fifteen, or twenty? You felled four of them before you were knocked unconscious? Only four? Do you think Mr. Secretary would like to hear of that? You could have done a little better, couldn’t you? Mr. Secretary would expect at least six. Then you were dragged on a hurdle ten miles or more across country! After that you were put in a charnel house stacked with bones and left in pitch darkness until another gang of cutthroats forced you to walk another ten miles. Then you found yourself in Martley village on the Worcester road. Poor gallant fool! The odds against you were too much!”

The man gulped, shivered, and sneezed violently. Hoarfrost's eyes hooded themselves and he coughed.

"And you can only tell me that it was too dark to recognize any of your assailants. Such a pity that, isn't it? And you say a voice kept whispering in your ear that every time you came back to Clifton — it would mean another and a longer spell in the charnel house? Oh, and you say you found in the same charnel house what felt like a damned popish image — a crucifix, as they call them? But you didn't think to bring it away with you. You heard no sounds, you say, except owls hooting in the woods. I'm happy you take an interest in nature. It passes the time away, doesn't it?"

The man hung his head and muttered, "It's the truth, Master."

Hoarfrost's eyes unhooded themselves and his knife flashed in his hand. His voice rose to a shrill scream.

"You're not only an incompetent fool; you're an incompetent liar." His violence brought on another fit of coughing. "Shall I tell you the truth of all this? Shall I? You were sleeping at your post when the very man you were watching for came. Yes, you were asleep when the priest came. A lusty priest, I give you that. And he put you in Sir James Croome's woodshed. You resisted. Yes, I'll accept that, and the priest's crucifix was torn off. Or perhaps it fell from his pocket because you resisted so gently, bearing in mind your precious skin, you lily-livered sheep. There you lay while they got on with their superstitious mummary-popery. Then on the third day, it occurred to your chicken brain to try the door, and it was open. As it had been since soon after the priest left, no doubt. So you came crawling back here like a whipped cur."

"No, Master, I swear . . ."

"Swear me nothing! Get out of here! Tomorrow morning buy yourself new clothes. What? What do you say? Money? You had pay when

you first came to this city. Buy them out of that, if you know no better. Then you'll come with me to Clifton . . .”

“No, Master,” the man whined.

Hoarfrost coughed and ignored him. “You'll come with me to Clifton. I'll get the truth of this out of that James Croome. You'll all three come. Do you hear? All three! Now get out.” Hoarfrost pulled himself to his feet. Behind him his twisted shadow was grotesque on the wall. He crept toward his three minions with knife point advanced. They jostled and shouldered one another to be first from the room.

The next morning the teeming rain had stopped by the time Boniface toiled up the stairs to Master Hoarfrost's private room bearing in his hands a tray with breakfast for four, but the sky was overcast and a gusty wind from the southwest was rattling the casements, and in the countryside it was busy stripping dying leaves from the trees. Inside the room, the draft was lifting the papers that littered the table and forcing puffs of smoke down the chimney. It was just a half-hour after ten when Boniface tapped on the door and sidled in with his load. Hoarfrost rapidly gathered his papers together. The three spies, the innkeeper saw, were seated on stools, and the one who had burst in, tattered and torn, the night before, was dressed in a new plum-colored doublet and he had a jaunty soft cap, gay with a peacock's feather, on the side of his head.

Boniface put down his tray and backed from the room. As he softly closed the door behind him, he heard the scrape of stools being drawn up to the table. There came a burst of coarse laughter and the innkeeper stood silent with his ear close to the panels.

“Ar. Found one who was a Papist,” he heard a man say. “Can't say he wanted to give me a new suit. Not till I talked to him like a brother. Told him what it's like living in a dungeon with six inches of water on the floor. Told him a bit about the rack, I did, and drew him a little picture of it, too. Said I'd find a priest in his cellars if I had to put one

there first. Just so he'd qualify, all legal like, for the dungeon and the rack. Bit stubborn he was, at first, that tailor, and whined about his wife and children. But he come 'round in the end. Give me these clothes and this cap of his own free will, he did."

The raucous laughter burst out once more, and Boniface crept softly down the stairs.

"That would be Master Richard Grey," he whispered to himself. "May the Holy Mother of God defend us all."

Half an hour later, Hoarfrost limped, coughing, into the yard and called for the horses. Followed by his three ruffians, he rode into the city on his way to Worcester Bridge and Clifton-on-Teme.

Hoarfrost cantered gently along the road across the plain with two of his followers close behind him. As the distance from Worcester increased and the riders drew near to the hill country about the river Teme, the third spy, the man in the new plum-colored doublet, fell farther and farther behind. He was regretting with all his heart the return to the district of his misfortunes. In the village of Martley, the pensioners seated before the alms-houses were entertained by Hoarfrost's pulling up his horse and waiting until his laggard minion caught up with him.

"Keep up with us," Hoarfrost hissed from the corner of his mouth. By the time the steep and difficult road dropping down to the Teme was reached and the whole of Hoarfrost's attention was given to his horse, plum-colored doublet was well behind again. When he had splashed through the ford, Hoarfrost shrugged to see the peacock feather still among the trees at the beginning of the perilous descent. He waited for a few moments and began to breast the last steep hill up into Clifton. Had he been near enough, he would have seen that the forehead of his man, whose duty it had been to watch Sir James Croome's house, was beaded with sweat. He would have seen, too, that the man's eyes continually slid sideways to left and right, looking

first over the escarpment into the deep valley of the Teme and then into the impenetrable woods on his right. He was riding tensed in his saddle, and the horse, conscious of its rider's discomfort, was nervously negotiating the dangerous way.

Hoarfrost rounded a bend and lost sight of his assistants for a short minute. At that moment, although it was early afternoon, an owl called from the east and was echoed by another and another. At the sound, the last traveler jerked upright in his saddle, pulling sharply on the reins so that the horse reared and plunged. The man stared about him wildly, pulled the horse's head around, and spurred it up the bank into the trees.

The sound of the plunging hooves reached Hoarfrost faintly, and once more he halted and his two nearest followers drew rein behind him. The three of them sat silently, ears and eyes alert, until at last a round black object sailed from among the trees high into the air. In its flight, it jerked and fluttered and began to fall to the ground. To the ears of the three silent men came the soft but unmistakable twang of a bowstring. Hoarfrost urged his horse forward until he came to where the object was lying in the dirt on the highway. He looked down on a new soft cap with a broken peacock feather drooping from its side. It was transfixed by a crossbow bolt.

From the depth of the forest, a horse neighed and an owl hooted derisively.

Hoarfrost gazed down on the battered finery and then searched with his eyes the woods on either side of the road. There was no sound or movement but the sigh and sway of branches in the wind.

He beckoned his two remaining men to follow, and with his chin sunk on his chest, he continued his climb to the village.

When Hoarfrost arrived in Clifton, Sir James Croome, dressed in half-armor and with his sword sheathed at his side, was standing before his own front door. On his right hand stood Nicholas, and Philip stood

on his left. The swords of both young men were loose in their scabbards.

“You can hardly expect me to bid you welcome, Master Benjamin Hoarfrost,” Sir James said coolly as the government agent drew rein in the village street.

“Nevertheless, I see that I am expected,” Hoarfrost answered. “Things go on in these woods of yours that I should like to know more about — in fact, that I will know more about.”

Sir James Croome laughed. “It takes a Worcestershire man to understand Worcestershire ways. You have not that honor, Master Hoarfrost, I believe. It’s a far cry from the sewers of London to the valleys of the Teme and Sapey.”

Hoarfrost coughed and spat in the dust at Sir James’s feet.

“It sticks in my mind that these lands would be better looked after by the queen’s government. Mr. Secretary has those who are trained to deal with vermin. These woods are infested, are they not, Sir James? A recommendation from me would carry much weight. And the house — your house, Master Croome — is comfortable.”

Nicholas glanced from the corner of his eye at Sir James. He was waiting for the order to help drive the threatening upstart from the village with edge and point of sword. But Sir James seemed to be paying little attention to Hoarfrost’s words. His head was turned toward the end of the village street, and there was a worried frown between his brows.

“I see you have nothing to say,” Hoarfrost continued. “Let me tell you that it is a serious crime to interfere with Mr. Secretary’s agents in the execution of their duty. It qualifies you for uncomfortable quarters in Worcester Castle, Master James Croome. This I will deal with in due course. For the moment, I am here to search your house for priests and to find childish popish baubles.”

Hoarfrost urged his horse forward a pace. Sir James's head swung toward him, and there was a joyous light of battle in his eyes.

"Another step at your peril," he cried and with a sound like the hiss of a venomous snake, and a flash of light from its polished steel blade, his sword leaped from its scabbard. Without spoken orders, Nicholas and Philip bared their weapons. Hoarfrost sat for a second, looking beneath lowered lids at the three quivering points before him.

"Ride them down," he ordered his two horsemen without turning his head.

His two ruffians drew their hangers — heavy swords that would have snapped the rapier blades clean from their hilts at the first awkwardly warding blow — and began to maneuver their horses to ride first on Nicholas and Philip.

Nicholas swung about to face his assailant with Sir James at his side. In that second, it flashed through his mind that there had been no mention in the lessons in swordsmanship that he had been given as a senior pupil at St. Peter's School, about what to do when there were two great iron-shod hooves thrashing the air a few yards in front of him. In the same second, he realized the cause of Sir James's preoccupation a few moments before. Another horseman with a lady riding pillion behind him was cantering calmly down the village street.

Everything seemed to happen at once. Nicholas heard a hoarse cry behind him, and as he gave ground before the cavorting horse, he saw Philip struck by the shoulder of the second ruffian's steed and its rider's heavy sword uplifted to strike down Sir James from behind. From the tail of his eye, he saw Sir James turn and his sword flash out and upward. There was a shrill scream. Immediately his own attacker engaged his attention, and even as Nicholas stepped lightly aside to meet his assailant on the man's left hand, a long thin snake hissed from the empty air and wound itself about the rider's neck. He jerked backward in his saddle and his sword fell from his fingers.

All was over in a matter of seconds, yet to Nicholas it seemed that a day had passed since he first drew his sword. It was with a faint surprise that he saw Philip scrambling up from the ground and Sir James standing, smiling, with blood dripping slowly from the point of his rapier.

Hoarfrost sat, crouched in his saddle, as if he had been carved in stone, and behind him a lovely lady was standing where she had jumped from her pillion seat. She was calmly coiling the long leather lash of a short-handled whip.

Sir James bowed low before her, and the lady walked forward and turned to face Hoarfrost. Nicholas saw that she was young, scarcely older, he thought, than Philip, yet there was about her an air of elegance and authority that seemed out of place in the countryside. A little hard crowned hat with a curling ostrich feather sat jauntily on flaxen curls, and a narrow white ruff caressed a rounded and determined chin. Her deep-green traveling cloak parted to allow a glimpse of flowered petticoat and the hands coiling the whip lash were sheathed in bejeweled gloves. Her scarlet lips were parted to speak to Hoarfrost when he, eyes blazing, spat at her the single word, "Vixen." The lady's delicate tip-tilted nose rose a fraction in the air.

"Sir James," she said over her shoulder, "will you tell me who, or what, this is?"

Sir James Croome lounged to her side, wiping his fouled sword on his handkerchief. He glanced down its shining length, holding it up to his eye. The slender weapon pointed straight at Hoarfrost's heart. He tossed his bloodied handkerchief into the gutter and sheathed his sword. Again he bowed to the youthful elegance.

"The man's name is Benjamin Hoarfrost," he said. "He is a noted pursuivant and a creature of Walsingham's. I hear that he is now the chief persecutor of Catholics in this county." At this, Hoarfrost's eyes

hooded themselves. "He is, moreover, a notorious thief, and enriches himself from fines gathered legally, even though iniquitously, from recusants. I think, perhaps, Mr. Secretary does not know about this." Hoarfrost was seized by a fit of coughing, and his hands began to itch for his dagger.

"And these men?" she asked imperiously, with a wave of her hand toward those who had attacked Nicholas and Philip.

"Two of his ruffianly spies," Sir James answered. "He came here with three. One of them met with a slight mishap in the woods recently." Sir James raised a hand and stroked his mustaches. "His clothing was ruined. Early this morning, the man persuaded a certain Worcester tailor, with outrageous threats, to reclothe him. However, the clothing has now been restored to the rightful owner."

"And the man?" the lady asked with a delicious twinkle in her eye.

"Doubtless searching for a cottage where the washed linen is drying on the hedgerow," Sir James answered with a broad smile. Then seriously, "Of course, there are many lesser spies and persecutors."

"You don't know all of them?"

"Not yet, but of course we shall," Sir James said.

"The news travels fast," the lady said.

"As usual."

"Tom?" The lady asked in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

"And friends," Sir James said and bowed once more.

"I see," she said quietly, and then clearly to the man behind whom she had ridden pillion, "Johnson, one of these men is wounded. Take

him 'round to the kitchen and see that his hurt is attended to. Then send him on his way."

The lady's servant bowed from his saddle. Nicholas hoped that his face remained expressionless when he recognized under the unkempt hair the calm features of Mr. Greenleaf.

Hoarfrost made a movement as if he were about to stop his minion's departure, but the lady's clear voice prevented him.

"A moment, sirrah," she said. "Sir James! I think this man — Hoarfrost did you say his name is? — I think this man should know who I am."

Sir James bowed once more and lifted cold eyes to Hoarfrost. He waited while the twisted body was racked by coughing.

"Hoarfrost," he said at last, "you have the honor to be addressed by the Lady Anne Delamere, sometime ward and now Ladyin-Waiting to Her Gracious Majesty the Queen. The Lady Anne is daughter to my Lord Delamere of Tedstone Delamere and Stoke Edith in the County of Herefordshire, and Privy Councilor to Her Majesty."

As Hoarfrost listened, his body appeared to shrink and his head trembled on his tortoise-like neck. He knew well enough that in spite of the efforts of Lord Burghley and Mr. Secretary Walsingham, there were still Catholic peers close to the Queen and of these the Lord Delamere was the most powerful.

He knew well, too, that the girl confronting him might well be a pet of the queen and, if that were so, a word from the chit in the royal ear could easily bring about his downfall. He saw his power over defenseless fellowmen rapidly disappearing, and there was a rough tightness about his throat as if it felt the sudden constriction of a rope. Reluctantly he dragged his bonnet from his head.

The Lady Anne looked at him disdainfully and addressed him in her clear voice. As she spoke, she allowed the long lash of her whip to fall in coils to the ground. She drew the thonged leather gently through her fingers.

“Master Hoarfrost,” she said, “you are a singularly unperceptive man. Have you not yet discovered that there are some things stronger than hatred? Friendship is one of them and belief in what is lasting and true. You may think you have triumphed over many who are Catholics. Did you not know that men, like nations, are always weakest in their hour of triumph? I am only a girl, and I know these things. You make me ashamed of some of my countrymen. When I go back to the court, I shall make it my business to tell the queen how one, Benjamin Hoarfrost, goes about his business in Worcestershire. Now be off with you! Leave my friends in peace!”

Sullenly Hoarfrost swung his horse about and faced the way to Worcester. He rode half a dozen yards and halted. He turned in his saddle, his eyes blazing with a malevolence that sent Sir James’s hand to the hilt of his sword, but before the curses that rose to his lips could be uttered, the Lady Anne’s whip snaked out and stung his horse on the flanks. The animal reared, broke into a gallop, and disappeared down the hilly road with its rider swaying in the saddle. Hoarfrost’s waiting man, he who had already felt the lash of the whip, spurred after his master. At the same time, the second appeared from Sir James’s kitchens, bandaged, and with his arm in a sling. He followed his master and companion. For the moment, the village was free of pursuivants. The clouds parted, showing a patch of blue sky from which the autumn sun shone bravely, bringing with it a promise of better days to come.

The Lady Anne recoiled her whip and laid a hand on Sir James’s forearm. “I will stay for the Mass,” she said as openly and frankly as if there were not a pursuivant in the length and breadth of England. “And afterward will you offer me a cup of wine? Then I must take Mr.

Greenleaf with me. There is to be a gathering of friends and neighbors in my father's house tonight."

With his own hand, Sir James flung the front door wide and bowed the lady into his house as he would have ushered in the queen. Nicholas gazed in astonishment at Philip. That young man's glazed eyes were following the Lady Anne, and he walked into the house as if he were in a dream. Nicholas turned to find Tom Longbow at his elbow.

"Mind you, young Master Nicholas," Tom said, "there wasn't never no real danger. Me and me friends had a bolt sighted on them ruffians all the time, ready and anxious to loose."

Suddenly Nicholas felt a deadly fatigue creeping over him. He swayed where he stood.

"Thank you, Tom," he said. "But I've got to learn, haven't I? Maybe one day you won't be there to help if things go wrong."

Tom stood for a moment after Nicholas had entered the house. He muttered to himself, "He'll do. He'll do — in time." Then Tom bent and picked up the two heavy swords that still lay in the roadway. One he took by the blade and tossed it, whirling, toward the trees on the other side of the road. For a moment, a heavily bearded man showed himself, dexterously caught the sword by the hilt, and disappeared. Tom tucked the other under his arm and made his way into the house through the kitchens.

On his way to the chapel in the attic, Tom stopped and crept into Nicholas's room. He laid the hanger on the boy's bed, where a moment before Nicholas had dropped his own rapier and sword belt. Tom went on, entered the chapel silently, and knelt behind Nicholas. He saw that the young man's head was bowed down on the faldstool and a gentle snore reached his ears. Tom smiled to himself and gave his attention to his prayers and the priest.

## Chapter 6

### Winter of Discontent

November was well advanced and the last of the leaves gone from the trees when Sir Robert Lygon came to Clifton. He dismounted before the stables and swung his arms and stamped his feet to restore his circulation.

“By the Mass, Harry,” he said to Sir James’s groom, who came running to take his horse. “It’s a proper raw day and no mistake. These Novembers in Worcestershire are getting too much for my old bones.”

The groom Harry laughed easily. Sir Robert was well known and liked at Clifton. There was no trace in his manner of the haughtiness he had shown to Hoarfrost in Worcester.

“You’ll be with us a long time yet, Sir Robert,” Harry said. “And I’ve known the mists this time of the year useful before now.”

“Mists you call ’em? Mists by our Lady! Down there, ’round Alfrick and Knightwick, and all up the valley of the Teme, the fog’s so thick you can’t see your hand in front of your face. If you mean you’re not likely to get any strangers ’round Clifton in this weather, you’re dead right. Why, I reckon I know the country as well as any, but if I hadn’t met that fellow Tom Longbow, I’d be blowing bubbles in the Teme by now. Suddenly appeared out of the fog, he did, like a ghost. Frightened me out of my wits. Didn’t you, Tom?”

There was no answer from Tom Longbow, and Sir Robert peered about him.

“There! See what I mean? Here one minute, gone the next. Gives me the creeps. However, he’s a good fellow. Sir James at home, Harry?”

“Yes, Sir Robert. He’s in the parlor with the young masters. The Lady Anne Delamere’s there, too. She came yesterday with her man, Johnson.” The shadow of what would have been a wink, had he been speaking to one of his own rank, passed over Harry’s face. “Came to visit Lady Croome and couldn’t go back because of the weather. Tom Longbow took a message to Stoke Edith. That’d be how you came to meet him, Sir Robert.”

Sir Robert Lygon peeled his gloves from his numbed fingers and found a coin for the groom.

“Seems I’m in luck with the company,” he said. “Don’t bother to announce me, Harry. I know the way.”

Sir Robert scorned to walk around the house to the front door. He strode into the kitchen, chucked Sir James’s cook under the chin, and clapped an arm around the waist of a serving-wench and kissed her soundly on the cheek. The girl squealed and dropped a platter, and Sir Robert laughed at her. He passed on and burst without ceremony into the parlor. He dropped his cloak and sword on a stool and stood in front of the leaping fire, pulling his netherstocks tight against his thighs, above his riding boots, to enjoy the heat the more.

“By the saints, James,” he said, “you’re comfortable here. Your servant, Lady Anne, and yours, Mr. Greenleaf. Well met, young masters.” He ruffled Nicholas’s hair and patted Philip on the shoulder.

“Welcome, Robin,” Sir James said. “You’re in a good mood.”

“Must be getting out of that plaguey drafty hole of mine at Madresfield,” Sir Robert said. “Can’t be anything else. The news I’ve got’s none too good.”

“Nor ours,” Sir James said gravely.

Sir Robert hooked a foot around a stool and pulled it up to the table. The Lady Anne sat down next to Philip, brushing his arm with hers.

Philip dropped a bundle of papers on which he had been working with Sir James and blushed to the roots of his hair. Nicholas took up a position behind Sir James's carved chair and leaned on the back of it.

"Now then, let's have it," Sir Robert said. "Bad news don't get any better with the keeping."

"You tell him, Mr. Greenleaf," Sir James said.

"It seems that the government's increasing their persecution," Mr. Greenleaf said sadly. "Especially against the priests. During the last few weeks, three priests have been taken in London, four in Leicestershire, and two in Derbyshire. There may be more that I haven't heard about yet."

"What's happened to 'em?" Sir Robert demanded.

"Dead," Mr. Greenleaf said bluntly. "God rest their souls." The six in the room crossed themselves and sat in silence.

"The trouble is," Mr. Greenleaf said at last, "it's the priests that hold the people together. In these days, with the continual crippling fines for those who refuse to attend the Protestant churches, with the threat of prolonged imprisonment for those who default, with the shadow of the gallows over every Catholic family that harbors a priest, it is fatally easy for men and women to conform, whatever they may believe in their hearts. The flesh is often weak, and it is the duty of the priest to strengthen the spirit." He stopped and sighed deeply. "If there are no priests . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Your life was forfeit the moment you set foot in England," Sir James Croome said, "but you came all the same."

"True! But I know it is my duty to keep people faithful to my — to our Church. And, of course, to bring those who have lapsed back to it. To do this I will give my life if it is asked of me. That presents no

problem to me. But it isn't all as simple as that. Take young Nicholas here."

Nicholas's heart missed a beat as it had so short a time before, in the presence of his headmaster.

"Just think of it," Mr. Greenleaf continued. "I sat and talked to Nicholas on the banks of the Ouse in York, and he knew at that time I was a priest. I knew from Master John Pullen that he had leanings to what is called the Old Faith, and I knew that he had witnessed the execution of Father Ingleby. What I did not know, and I don't know it to this day, was whether Nicholas was genuinely moved to become a Catholic, or whether, by his nature, he was on the side of the oppressed, on the side of the underdog."

"Oh, but Father, Mr. Greenleaf, I don't . . ." Nicholas began, and stopped in midsentence because a voice in his mind asked if Mr. Greenleaf was right, and he could not find the answer.

"You see, the point is that my life, if I am discovered, was already forfeit. By receiving Nicholas into the Church, I surrendered his life into the hands of the pursuivants. This is a heavy burden to put upon a priest's soul. Can you wonder if some priests welcome their martyrdom?"

"Are you suggesting, Mr. Greenleaf, that priests no longer wish to come to England?" Sir James asked.

"No. Of course they'll come. But the increasing difficulties provide more and more excuses why they should not. I understand the Thames is so closely watched that it is virtually impossible to land near London without being picked up by pursuivants. The same applies to Dover, Newhaven, Shoreham, and all the ports I can think of in Kent, Sussex, Hampshire. The Jesuits will always come if they can, but even they are opposed by the secular priests that remain."

The Lady Anne Delamere stretched out her hand and laid it on Mr. Greenleaf's clenched fist. "Take heart, Father," she said. "We all know your troubles. We have our own, and to bear them, we need you and your kind. The Catholics must be kept together, and without priests that cannot happen."

"They can't execute all of them. The more priests we have, the safer they'll be," Philip said.

"You would sacrifice them until public opinion turned against the slaughter?" Mr. Greenleaf asked bitterly.

Sir James Croome straightened his back in his carved armchair. "Mr. Greenleaf brought bad news, and it is natural that he is upset. You brought bad news, too, friend Robin. We might as well hear it. Then we will see what we can do to help."

Sir Robert Lygon rose from his stool and walked to the carved stone mantelpiece over the fire. He laid his arm along it and rested his forehead on the back of his hand. He gazed into the flames while the seconds ticked by and then turned and faced the company.

"My news is really rumor," he said. "I've been in London, as James knows, and there's a lot of curious talk going on there. There's nothing open, mark you, but hints are being dropped. Among the Catholics there, it's nothing more than a feeling. A sort of uneasiness. At least that's how I see it. What I didn't like was the way men tried to get into conversation with me in inns where I'm known. Not trying to trap me, because I'm well known as a Catholic who minds his own business. But somehow, I felt, doing their best to find out what I should do if certain things happened."

"What things?" Lady Anne asked in her clear voice.

Sir Robert straightened his back and looked down into the fearless loveliness of the girl's face. He answered the look in her eyes rather than her words.

“If you ask me,” he said, “there’s another plot. It may not be anything much yet, but it’s begun. There can be only one object in it; that’s obvious enough. It can’t be anything else than to put the Lady Mary of Scotland on the throne. What else could it be?”

“And the Lady Elizabeth, the queen?” Anne Delamere asked.

“There will be a tragical execution,” Sir Robert said bluntly.

“Assassination.”

“Oh no! No!” Mr. Greenleaf whispered and bowed his head in his hands with his elbows on the table.

“How much truth is there in this, Robin?” Sir James asked.

“How should I know, man? I wouldn’t touch it with a barge pole. I can’t do more than give you my impressions. What I didn’t like were the men who did their best to get into talk with me. I’d wager my best brood mare against a bundle of fagots they were government agents. By the beard of St. Barnabas I ought to know ’em. I’ve seen enough of them in my time.”

Mr. Greenleaf raised his head from his hands. His eyes looked as if they had sunk into his head, and there were dark half-circles beneath them.

“If this is true, you see what it means, don’t you?” He said. “First, a plot against the Lady Elizabeth’s life. If that is proved to her, she must take action. Heavens! Don’t you remember what the Act of Parliament passed this year said? God forgive me, I can quote it by heart. ‘If anything shall be compassed or imagined tending to the hurt of Her Majesty’s royal person by any person or with the privity of any person that may pretend title to the Crown of this realm’ — note that all of you — ‘any person that may pretend title to the Crown.’ Who else can there be but the Lady Mary, Queen of Scots? Then it goes on to say, ‘Her Majesty’s subjects may lawfully pursue to death every such wicked person by whom or by whose means, assent, or privity

any such wicked act may be attempted.' Oh, don't you see, Lady Anne and gentlemen?" He spread his hands wide, palms upward, over the table and looked around the company with all the sorrows of England in his eyes.

"Don't you see? Cause — an attempt on the life of the Lady Elizabeth with intent to replace her by the Lady Mary. Effect — the death of the Queen of Scots and a renewed and intensified persecution of all Catholics in England. It doesn't matter whether the plot exists or not. All that's wanted is that the public shall believe it existed."

He slumped on his stool and buried his head in his hands once more.

"Any names mentioned, Robin?" Sir James asked.

"H'm. Yes. Just a whisper. The leader's supposed to be a youngster by the name of Babington. Anthony Babington."

"Do you know him?"

"I do," the Lady Anne said. "He's been seen about the court. He's a foolish, foppish young squire from Derbyshire with more money than brains."

"Fairly near home," Sir James said. "Derbyshire."

"There's one nearer than that," said Sir Robert. "Young Ted Habington of Hindlip Hall."

Silence fell in the room, and as the November fog grew thicker in the valleys, a thin mist reached as far as the heights of Clifton and began to touch the windows with ghostly fingers.

"Thanks to Lady Anne," Sir James said, "we've had a few weeks' peace in this corner of Worcestershire. Now with the Habingtons involved, or even rumored to be involved, we may expect more visits

in the future. It won't be only Hoarfrost this time. It'll be the Sheriff and a posse or even armed men we may not know."

He looked nervously at the bowed head of Mr. Greenleaf. Sir Robert straddled his legs before the fire.

"You needn't worry about Mr. Greenleaf tonight anyway, James. There'll be nobody abroad in this." Sir Robert waved his hand toward the window. "Now, rouse yourselves, everybody. You're all looking as miserable as a lot of devils from the hottest corner of hell out in a Worcestershire east wind. Whatever's going to happen hasn't happened yet. Maybe it never will. Whether it does or not, it's time to do something. We've talked long enough. If there's going to be more persecution, the more need there'll be to hold the Catholics together. Right, James?"

"But of course. That's obvious," Sir James said.

"And for that we need the priests. Mr. Greenleaf says the southeast ports are closed, and we must take his word for that. So now's the time, James, to put our plan into operation. Do the youngsters know about it, James? And Lady Anne?"

"Nothing at all," Anne Delamere said.

"Only a little," Nicholas answered for himself and Philip.

"Then by the Mass," Sir Robert glanced apologetically toward Mr. Greenleaf, "it's high time they did. Things have been moving 'round here. Tom Longbow's the man to tell you about them. Why the blazes isn't he here? Always about, he is, when you don't expect him. Why can't he turn up now?"

"I might do something about that, Sir Robert. I don't know if it will be successful, but I can try," Nicholas said.

"Get on with it then, boy. Let's see how the magic works."

Nicholas slipped quietly from the room and opened the heavy front door. He took the silver whistle Tom had given him from inside his doublet and blew three shrill sweet blasts on it. The mist swirled about him as he waited. What he expected he did not know. Perhaps he hoped the fog would wreath and bind itself into a solid figure in a green doublet. He turned his head to the right and then quickly to the left, expecting to see Tom standing by his side. There was nothing but the clinging white vapor that beaded his eyelashes with diamonds. With a feeling of complete desolation, he entered the house and the parlor once more. Sir Robert looked at him with raised eyebrows, and Nicholas shook his head miserably. Sir Robert laughed at the boy's evident disappointment. His laugh was cut short by a knock from the hall. The door opened, and Tom Longbow stood bowing to the company. The Lady Anne laughed musically, and Sir Robert turned on her.

"By Endor," he said, "if you'd done what Nicholas has just done, my Lady, you'd have been in danger of burning as a witch. And I don't know that I'd have lifted a finger to stop it."

"Just the man we wanted, Longbow," Sir James said. "You came in the nick of time to save Nicholas's faith in you."

"When I promises a thing, I does me best to keep the promise. Leastways as far as I'm able," Tom said.

"That I believe," said Sir Robert, "although it makes my flesh creep. Well, now, Longbow, we've been talking about our plans. The time's come when we must get everything ready."

"Meaning on account of this new plot?"

"Now, how in the name of Beelzebub do you know anything about that?" Sir Robert demanded.

"Well, sir, stands to reason, don't it? Suppose this was a real plot, started by Mr. Babington and Mr. Habington, see? Mr. Secretary of

State Walsingham would get to know about it, wouldn't he?"

"It's true he seems to know about most things that go on," said Sir James.

"Well, this ain't a real plot. Started by Sir Francis Walsingham or by his orders. So we gets to know about it. Same thing, only the other way about, see?"

Sir Robert was looking at Tom Longbow with his mouth open, and the Lady Anne was struggling to stifle her giggles with a tiny lace-edged handkerchief.

"How do you know this?" Sir James asked softly. "Have you got your spies in Mr. Secretary's service?"

"Oh, no, Sir James." Tom Longbow was quite horrified. He raised a hand and scrubbed the back of his head. "Let me put it like this. You, sir, and Sir Robert here, and others like you, have got the means to buy yourselves off when you get somebody like that Hoarfrost on your track. You can drive him off with swords and whips, begging your pardon, me Lady. What happens if he gets to know I've been to confession? 'Course I got me bow, but nothing he wants. The next step's a length of rope and a bough of the nearest oak. The only defense me and the common men like me 'as got is to help one another. Pass on the information so we can keep out o' the road when the trouble starts, like. 'Course, we don't always get away with it, but come to that, neither does your kind, meaning no disrespect."

"You go to a lot of trouble to defend yourself," Mr. Greenleaf said.

Tom Longbow turned on him almost fiercely. "'Tain't only that and you know it, Father. Look, I'm an Englishman, and what's more, I'm a Worcestershireman, too, and I'm a Catholic same as me father and grandfather before me — aye, right back to the time when a Longbow fought for Sir Simon de Montfort at Evesham yonder, and no Parliament's going to tell me what to think. Come to that, the

queen ain't neither, God bless her. Not that she's tried to, come to think on it."

Mr. Greenleaf lifted his head, and his gentle smile lightened his face once more.

"Tom, my son," he said quietly, "may the sweet Mother of God bless you. You've restored my faith."

Tom shuffled uncomfortably and turned eagerly when Sir James asked, "How do you know this is not a real plot?"

"Well, I suppose I don't rightly know, although it stands to reason. There's one of 'em in the plot who's as thick as thieves with this Master Babington and Master Edward Habington down Hindlip way. The one I mean's always in and out of Mr. Secretary's house at one and two in the morning. What's he doing there if he's innocent, I asks you? They do say, too, he's not really a Catholic. Only pretends, like others I've heard tell of. Gifford's his name."

"Gifford. Of course. Gilbert Gifford. I might have guessed. Expelled from the college in Rome," Mr. Greenleaf muttered under his breath.

"Not that it'll make any difference to us, real plot or faked," Tom continued. "There'll be hangings, drawings, and quarterings, just the same, and soldiers riding about the countryside. However, we'll do our best, Sir James, me and me friends, as you well knows."

"Well, bless my soul," Sir Robert Lygon said. "You've frightened me, made my flesh creep, and amazed me all in the space of a few hours. That's enough for one day, I think. We brought you in here so that you could tell the Lady Anne and the young gentlemen something about our plans. Can you do that?"

"Ah, and glad to, Sir Robert. Well, see, near to here's a bit of wild country. What Master Philip Topsham there calls the secret country.

It's the valley of the Sapey really. You know it, me Lady. Played in it many a time when you was a little lass, you did."

"Yes, of course, I know it," the Lady Anne Delamere said.

"And the two young gentlemen know it, too," Tom Longbow continued. "Now, this valley's terrible hard to get into, or out of, for that matter. 'Course it could be done, but it's certain sure it couldn't be done without me or me friends knowing. What's more, down in that valley's a church, a house where the monks used to live, and what's left of a village. Ruined it is, most of it. What Sir James thought . . ."

"And you, Tom," Sir James put in.

"Thank you, sir. What we thought was we could keep priests comfortable-like down there while we made arrangements for them to go about the country. Sort of headquarters if you see what I mean. There's the house what belonged to the monks and the church. Never been used, it hasn't, since the monasteries came to an end, but sound as a bell it is."

"That's all perfectly true," Sir James said seriously. "We must have a headquarters where priests can be received when they come into this country and where they can be taught something about the arrangements we have got for travel and for hiding them in danger. But there are certain difficulties, Tom will tell you."

"Ah, 'course I will. There's plenty of room in the monks' house. There's a friend of mine lives there now. Does a bit of farming, so to speak. Horse coping's nearer the mark. But suppose somebody got into the valley. We'd have to hide the priests. There's plenty of places to do that, but there's work to be done on them first. I ain't got enough help. Look, most of them what lives in the valley — and there ain't more than half a dozen — must keep on with their ordinary work or it'll be noticed. Do it all meself, I would, but it takes time."

Nicholas's eyes were eager. "Sir James! Please, Sir James! May I help? I'd love to."

"You might do that, boy," Sir James said. "I expect I could find at least one more. But there's another difficulty. It's no good having a headquarters for priests unless we have the priests to use it. How are we to get them?"

"That's where I come in," said Sir Robert Lygon. "By the beard of . . . oh, sorry, Father . . . there's only one way and that's through Devon. Master Philip Topsham here . . ."

"But of course," Philip said and rose to his feet in excitement. "This is my work. I know the little creeks. I know the fishermen. Of course I can do it."

"Don't forget, Philip, there's a government man about in Branscombe. He'll have to be dealt with. Then there's the problem of getting the priests from Devon to here. It's a long way. There's a great deal of work to be done," Sir James said.

"Now, by heaven, we're getting somewhere." Sir Robert Lygon rubbed his hands together. "Pull up your stools, everybody. Yes, and you, Longbow. None of your disappearing tricks, now."

"But first, a cup of wine, and there will be —" Sir James began.

"I know," Philip said. "Pies. I saw them. With your permission, sir?" Sir James nodded, and Philip almost skipped from the room.

As they sipped their wine, Nicholas whispered in the ear of Tom Longbow, "It was marvelous. How did you get here so quickly?"

"Easy, young Master," Tom replied. "I was at the inn next door. Where else would you expect me to be on a night like this?"

The Lady Anne Delamere came to Nicholas's side. "You'll let me help, will you not, Nicholas? You and Tom here? My two friends."

She put an arm around the shoulders of Nicholas and Tom Longbow. Philip, holding the door open for Lady Croome and the serving-maids, saw the gesture and almost went down on his knees to welcome her to the company.

The curtains were drawn and the candles lighted. The parlor of Sir James Croome's house in Clifton was comforting and the warmth wrapped around those who debated within it. They could not know that frost, snow, thaw, and rain, followed by another long frost, was going to make the winter a time of discontent.

## Chapter 7

### The Notched Arrow

For three days, the fog persisted and blanketed all the valleys of the West Midlands. Philip and Nicholas spent their enforced time indoors preparing for the long journey to the south coast. Lady Croome insisted on examining every article of Philip's wardrobe, and she, and the Lady Anne, sat for many hours stitching in such daylight as there was, and afterward in candlelight. Nicholas was amazed to find Philip in their bedroom gently caressing the new seams with his finger tips before he packed the garments in his saddlebags.

"I shall never be able to wear these things," Philip said dreamily.

"Why? What's the matter with them?" Nicholas asked. "Aren't they done properly?"

"Of course they are. Just look at these beautiful little stitches."

"Yes, my mother's a good needlewoman, isn't she?" Nicholas said.

"Oh, your mother . . ." Philip said and hastily stuffed the garment into a bag and clattered out of the room.

Nicholas stared after him for a moment. "Excited at going to Devon, I suppose," he murmured to himself and gathered up Philip's sword to take to the smithy for grinding.

Mr. Greenleaf, led safely by Tom Longbow through the swirling fog, paid a visit to the Sapey Valley and the ancient abandoned church. He returned with garments dripping from the moisture-laden air, but he was glowing with happiness. He could not stop talking about the time when he would say Mass in an English church that had never known the ceremonies of the new state-ordered services.

On the evening of the third day, the warm wind from the southwest dropped and the countryside lay silent and hidden under the fog. A breeze from the east sprang up, and the following morning dawned bright and cold and clear. Tom Longbow arrived at the kitchen door just as Harry the groom was making Philip's saddlebags secure.

Philip came from the house, his adieus done, booted, spurred, and cloaked for the journey. Nicholas, too, was wrapped against the cold. He proposed to ride a few miles with his friend.

"By your leave, young masters," Tom said, "reckon I might put you on the way, as far, any road, as Upton-on-Severn. Cross the river there, see? There ain't no call to go through Worcester, with that Hoarfrost still about, as I hear. Besides, we'll go through a bit of country Master Nicholas ought to know about."

The three of them rode from the stable yard to the village street. Sir James and Lady Croome stood before their house to wave goodbye, and just before the riders turned the corner into the lane by the Knowle, the clear voice of Lady Anne came to them.

"Take care, Philip," she called. "Come back soon."

Philip almost fell off his horse turning to wave long after the bare hedgerow had hidden Sir James Croome's house from view. For three miles he rode with an unhappy face and spoke no word to his companions.

Tom led them off the beaten track onto narrow ways between the trees, and sometimes over mossy forest floor where no mark was visible to show there was a path. Occasionally, when the trees thinned, Nicholas caught a glimpse of the three sentinel pines that he already thought of as his.

Mile after mile they rode in single file, sometimes cantering and sometimes holding their horses back to a walk where the path was steep, and no word passed between them. At last Tom, in the lead,

held up his hand for a halt and the two young men drew rein beside him. In front of them, through the naked trees, they saw the gleam of sunlight reflected from water-filled ruts of a highway.

Tom extended his left arm. "Worcester over there." He nodded his head to the right. "Upton. Wait here till I call you."

Tom rode on to the verge of the road and looked up and down its empty length. He beckoned to his companions, and in a moment they were hidden in the trees on the far side of the highway and making for the bridle path that ran along the banks of the Severn. When Upton Bridge came in sight, Tom halted.

"That's where you cross the Severn," he said. "Coming the way we did, you may be sure that none of that Hoarfrost's spies knows you've gone from Sir James's house. If there were any about, which I doubt. That means you're all right for a bit. Now listen to old Tom and remember what he says, because he knows a bit about travel. More'n you do, and no disrespect meant. The next town's Tewkesbury. Ride straight through and have no fear. There's too much traffic there coming up from Bristol and to-do with the trows — they're the Severn river ships — for them to pay any attention to strangers. The next village of any size is Cheltenham, as Sir James 'as told you, or so I understand."

"Is that safe, Tom?" Philip asked.

"Ah, safe enough. It's only a village, but don't stay there. You'll have had about enough riding by that time, but push on all the same about five miles, making for the hills. Cotswold, they call it. You'll come to a pretty little place called Painswick. You can't miss the sign of the Hundred Yews. It's only a little inn, but put up there for the night. There'll be a room ready for you."

"Ready for me? But how do they know I'm coming?"

“ ’Cause I’ve passed the word ’round, see? Just give your name to the innkeeper. After that, you’ve got some terrible wild country to ride through. Bare, it is, and if the wind’s like it is today, it’ll freeze the marrow in your bones. You’ll think you’re on the roof of the world, and it ain’t particularly safe, neither.”

“Pursuivants?” Philip asked.

Tom laughed. “No. They wouldn’t last ten minutes up there. If they’d got the guts to go, which I doubt. It’s wild country, like I said, and the few people what live in it are wilder. You could get knocked on the head and have your purse filched and your body might lie there for six months before it was found. However, that won’t trouble you.”

Philip smiled and patted his sword.

“No, not that,” Tom said. “That wouldn’t be much use against half a dozen good ash cudgels. When you’re in the Hundred Yews, a red-haired man’ll speak to you by name. Friend o’ mine. Bit rough-spoken, he is, but all right just the same. He’ll ride with you the next day — tomorrow, that is. Nobody’ll come near you while you’re with him. You’ve got a goodish ride in front of you today, so you won’t want to do so much tomorrow. You’ll have to lie in a shepherd’s hut for a night. Sorry I can’t do better for you.”

“Of course I don’t mind,” Philip said.

“No more did I think you would. It won’t be too bad, any road. Now, the next day you’ll be on the other side of Bath and near your own country. You can look after yourself then, I reckon. Chard ain’t so very far and you’ve got a place to go to there, or so I hears.”

“Yes. Sir Edward North,” Philip said. “But how did you know?”

“Now, look, young master. There ain’t so many places where safe lodging can be found for Catholics. Such as there are, we got to know ’em. Stands to reason. You just remember what I say and ask

no questions. As far as I can see, everything'll be all right, but in case anything goes wrong, I want you to have this."

Tom drew a sheaf of crossbow bolts from his quiver and selected one from them that had three groups of three notches cut in the shaft. He gave it to Philip.

"See this? Three trinities making a trinity, see? Keep this handy in your doublet. If you think there's going to be trouble, take it out, natural-like. You might just handle it. Clean the dirt out of your fingernails with the point if you wants. Make the notches a bit deeper with your dagger. Anything. You can do this in an inn or on the road if anybody joins you you're doubtful of. Anybody who doesn't know what it means won't pay any attention. Those who do'll speak to you. Then you'll know they're friends o' mine and yours, too. Tell 'em what's the matter. They'll help."

"It's a sort of secret sign, is it?" Philip asked.

"Well, you might call it that, and then you might call it a password. Those of us, ordinary men like me, who want to keep out of trouble, got to be able to recognize one another. That's how we do it."

"So everybody who knows this is a Catholic?" Philip asked.

"What do you think?" Tom answered. "There's just one more thing. When you've got everything lined up with your men in Devon, you've got to let us know. It don't matter who gets the message — Sir James, Sir Robert Lygon, Master Nicholas here, or me. But somebody up here's got to know it's fixed. For your men to bring the priests from France, I mean. We'll see they know on the other side of the Channel. Now, we don't want no letters nor nothing in writing. Too easy for the government's men to get hold of, they are. You'll just have to go into the inns and play with that bolt. Not in your own village. Branscombe, ain't it? But in the little places 'round about, two or three miles away. It won't take long till somebody speaks to you

who's got a bolt the same as yours. Then tell him everything. We'll know in a couple of days."

"I don't know what we should do without you, Tom," Philip said.

"You'd manage," Tom answered. "Same as we did. Only we've had years to do it. On your road now, young master. It's a long ride you've got. St. Christopher'll look after you, I don't doubt."

Nicholas stretched out his hand and took Philip's in his. "Good luck, Philip," he said. "See you soon."

"Of course," Philip answered. "And when you get back, tell the Lady Anne I'll do my best, and . . . Oh, well, it doesn't matter."

Philip spoke to his horse and cantered briskly along the towpath. Nicholas and Tom sat and watched him go, and waited until the hollow drum of his horse's hooves on the bridge planking had died away. Tom chuckled quietly.

"He'll be back as soon as he can, you mark my words, but not until he's got everything arranged proper, you'll see. Better get on. There's more to be done yet, young master."

Tom wheeled his horse about and headed for the Teme Valley. Nicholas rode close behind, trying in his mind to follow Philip's progress in the first stages of his long ride to Devon.

Miles of forest tracks and fords passed beneath their horses' hooves, and Nicholas rode without paying any great attention to his surroundings. His mind was occupied with memories of the past few weeks, and he was wondering why he had become involved in mysterious comings and goings, in secrecy, and in plots and spying. For a moment he found himself regretting the peaceful routine of his schooldays. Tom, in front, turned and, with a hand on his horse's haunch, spoke to Nicholas.

“We leave our horses here, young master,” he said.

Nicholas swung his leg over his saddle and, bridle in hand, followed Tom. The trees were sparse where the two dismounted, and drifts of autumn leaves were piled against the ancient boles. Above the naked branches, the sky gleamed a pale cold blue.

“There’s a forester’s shelter nearby,” Tom said. “We’ll leave the horses there. Can’t take them where we’re going.”

Tom led the way between the tree trunks to a tiny, three-walled hut with a thatched roof, nestling against a red sandstone cliff. The little refuge had one side open to the air, but it was so placed that the dead bracken laid on its earthen floor was dry. No rain had beaten in.

“Foresters used to shelter here in the old lord’s time,” Tom said. “Cozy little place, with the woods open before it. The horses’ll come to no harm in it, any road.”

He hitched the bridles to rusty rings in the wooden walls. “Now I’ll show you another way into the valley. Not easy nor comfortable this way ain’t, but you need to know it.”

Tom stepped lightly over the thick carpet of leaves outside the shelter and walked, with Nicholas at his side, through the aisles of the trees until the splash of hurrying waters was loud in their ears. Underneath the noise of the running river, like the note of an organ pipe, was the moan of the east wind in the treetops. Nicholas saw they were following a recognizable path and before them was the gleam of leaping water. On his left hand he could see the russet rock of the cliff with here and there a stunted sapling struggling to gain life from an earth-filled crevice. The path turned sharply and ran alongside the little river.

“Down there is the Teme,” said Tom and gestured to his right. “Up the other way is the gorge where the Sapey comes out of the valley.”

Nicholas peered between the trees and saw the dark shadows of a narrow cleft where the rocks were tumbled and broken and where the Sapey stream was still busy grinding out a passage and churning the stones in its bed.

It seemed to him that the forest was full of sound. The waters rushed in the miniature canyon and splashed joyfully in their rocky way to the river. The wind moaned in the topmost twigs of oak and ash. Yet, he felt, in spite of these, the woods were silent. The noise of wind and water were only a background for a tense and waiting hush.

As he walked at Tom's side, he became conscious that his back and legs ached, and the insides of his thighs were sore from hours of gripping the saddle. There was a nagging pain in his forehead from the cold wind. He wanted more than anything to be in the house with a huge fire and the flames leaping up the chimney. Not in Sir James's house in Clifton. In York. In the Stonegate. With his mother and his own little bed warm and waiting. There had been no worry then about bringing priests in safety and hiding them. There was peace and contentment there. He could not see why he was out in the quiet of cold woods with the rush of running water beating at his eardrums.

The sky clouded over. The thin winter sunshine disappeared, and in its place came a heavy yellow light that bore down and crushed the wind so that the trees stood motionless, their speech stilled, waiting.

Tom had been talking to him, and he had not heard a word. Then, suddenly, Tom spoke sharply, his words cutting the oppressed air like the lash of a whip.

"Wait! Wait, young master! There's something funny! Wait . . ." But to Nicholas the voice came from a great distance. He stumbled on and felt Tom's hand snatch at his elbow, fumble, and slide away. At his feet was a great pile of dead leaves and beneath them twigs that cracked. He was falling, falling, and then there came the chilling shock of ice-cold water.

From the yellow clouds above, the first heavy snowflakes began to fall.

## Chapter 8

# Valley of the Shadow

Nicholas came to himself with a shock. He was half-sitting, half-lying in six inches of freezing water, and everything about him was dark. What had he been doing?

He remembered that he had been wishing for the old comfortable time before Sir James and Mr. Greenleaf came into his life. But, of course, he was on his way to the hidden valley with Tom Longbow. They were going to arrange hiding places for priests, and it was all fun. It was exciting.

Above him was a circle of light. He struggled to his hands and knees and at last to his feet. The bright circle was partly obscured by something round and black. Kit Dobson's football, perhaps. Then there was a voice. Tom's voice.

"You all right, young master? Slipped right through me hands, you did."

"I think I'm all right. Can you get me out? What is it?"

"Never mind that now. It's who made it, what matters. Now, look. I'm going to buckle my belt 'round a young tree here. If I hang on to that with one hand, I can reach down to you with the other. We'd be in a proper pickle if I got pulled in on top of you. Now I'm going to lie down. Stretch up all you can."

There was a scuffling and a cracking of twigs from above. A shower of leaves and crumbled earth fell on Nicholas's upturned face. Tom's head appeared once more, and then his arm reached downward. Nicholas stood on tiptoe and felt the steel clasp of Tom's fingers about his wrist.

“Gently,” Tom said. “It ain’t too firm up here. Worse down there, I expect.” He chuckled softly. “Try to help with your toes on the sides. That’s it! Scramble!”

With the steady pull of Tom’s hand and an occasional foothold in the irregular sides of the hole into which he had fallen, Nicholas rose, inch by inch, toward the daylight. At last he was free of the trap and Tom gave one last heave. A moment later, both lay panting among the autumn leaves while heavy snowflakes settled on them.

Tom rose to his feet and, without waiting to brush the soil and snow from his doublet and hose, took Nicholas by the hand and made him trot to the shelter where the horses were tethered. The warm smell of dry bracken and horseflesh came comfortingly to Nicholas’s nostrils.

“Going to be a steady fall, this snow,” Tom said. “No time to be lost.”

He stepped outside the shelter, put his cupped hands to his mouth, and the weird, lonely cry of an owl rang through the woods. He stood for a second, waiting, and an answering cry came to him. He turned and joined Nicholas in the shelter. His happy smile creased the brown skin of his face, and his white teeth gleamed in the shadows of the hut.

“Now, young master,” said he, “that was unfortunate. Ought to have known better, I did. Let’s have a look at you.” He ran his hands down Nicholas’s sides, thighs, and shins, stopping when Nicholas gave an involuntary cry of pain. Tom’s hands stopped, pressing and kneading around the tender spot.

“Nought but a sprain and maybe a bruise or two, I think,” he said. “We’re lucky in that. You’re wet through, but you’ll be wetter before we’ve finished, so we won’t bother about that. Rub yourself down with this.”

He gathered a double handful of the dry bracken from the floor of the hut and pressed it into Nicholas's fingers. The cry of an owl sounded from near at hand.

"Ah. Now we'll be able to get on," he said.

A man with a full brown beard, and cloak heavy with snow, stepped into the hut. Tom was squatting on his heels.

"Seen anybody about, Evan?" he asked without looking up.

"Not a soul, man," the newcomer answered.

"Young Master Nicholas here fell into a trap," Tom said. "Only been dug an hour or two. Have a look at it. It's just before the path runs into the brook. He won't be far away, I reckon, whoever dug it. Waiting about for the catch, see? But he isn't going to wait long in this storm. We must get him, Evan. Quick!"

"What way will he be going, whatever?" the bearded man asked.

"You can guess that as well as I can," Tom said. "He'll have been brought in by Hoarfrost. What's more, he'll be a forester, but a stranger to these parts. He'll be on his way to Worcester, but he won't be as quick as you or me, not knowing his way about like we do. He spotted that path ended at the water. That's bad, Evan. There's got to be stepping stones and the path running on the other side. Later. There's no time to lose."

"Hoarfrost said he'd send men who knew how to clear what he called the vermin from the woods," Nicholas said.

"See?" said Tom to Evan. "Off with you! Warn the others. I'll be at my cottage. Quick!"

The man nodded, turned, and was lost in the swirling snowflakes.

“Now,” said Tom. “We got to get on, too. This ain’t going to be overhappy for you, Master Nicholas, but it’s got to be done.

Quarter of an hour or so, and you’ll be warm and comfortable. Just keep close behind me.”

Tom patted the haunch of the nearest horse and walked out into the snow. Nicholas followed a yard behind.

The new way into the Sapey Valley passed the trap into which Nicholas had fallen. Tom stopped for a moment at the hole and thoughtfully pushed a heap of the snow-covered leaves into it. He grunted to himself and passed on to the edge of the Sapey Brook. Without hesitation, he stepped into the water, and with it swirling up his calves, like the bow wave of a ship under way, he began to wade upstream. Nicholas shivered at the icy shock as he followed. The surface of the water was scummed by melting snow, and Nicholas struggled to plant his feet in the places where Tom had trodden. He could not see what lay beneath the chilling foamy surface.

The noise of the falling torrent grew louder as the two entered the Sapey Gorge and the sheer cliffs on either side pressed closer and closer. The swift stream was broken by fallen boulders against which the waters clamored, flinging spray over them into the deep pools that lay in their shelter downstream. Tom turned and gestured to Nicholas to take care.

They came to a place where the gorge narrowed and seemed to come to an abrupt end. The waters poured over the edge of a cliff a hundred feet above, thundering downward and filling the narrow place with their clamor. They did not fall directly, but leaped from ledge to ledge over the terraced rocks. A mist of spray hung over the falls and mixed with the falling snow, so that Tom, a yard in front, was just a dark shape to Nicholas. Tom reached back and took Nicholas by the hand.

Cautiously Tom edged along the margin of the maelstrom that heaved and boiled beneath the falls, and at the verge of the stream, he climbed onto a flat rock and pulled Nicholas up beside him. Tom, like Nicholas, was soaked to the skin, and his eyebrows and hair were beaded with drops of water. He smiled happily. From flat rock to flat rock, arranged like a giant's stepping stones, Tom went, until the fall was thundering beside them. Then, suddenly, they were behind it and facing a clear shelf of rock, with a sheet of falling water on the one hand and the rugged cliff on the other.

The noise from the cataract was so great that no conversation was possible, so in the silvery light that filtered through the liquid curtain, Tom just smiled an impish smile and went on. At the farther end of the shelf, a tumbled mass of rocks made a rough stairway upward, and the two climbed until they stood in the short grass on the top of the cliff. On their right hand, toward which the grass-grown land descended, the Sapey ran calmly, gathering its energies for the struggle in the gorge. Tom shook himself as a dog does when its coat is wet.

"Here we are," he said. "And I reckon we won't waste any time catching snowflakes. You'll remember the way in, any road. The place to be careful of is at the bottom of the waterfall. Easy, apart from that, if you know it. If you don't . . ." Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Now we'll run."

Tom took Nicholas's hand in his, and side by side they trotted toward the place where the village green had once been. Curiously the snowflakes seemed less dense in the hidden valley. Nicholas's muscles were aching and he was seized by fits of shivering as he ran. Tom looked at him with concern.

"Bear up," Tom said. "Look, here's the old village. There's things I got to tell you about that later. Come along, keep going. Count your steps. One, two, one, two. And again . . . Again."

Nicholas remembered vaguely the ruined houses around the green. He had a memory of the brook in sunshine. Now it was dun and it grumbled between the piers where the bridges had been.

Snow was still falling. He wanted, so much, warmth and comfort and to lie on his back. In his right shoulder, there was a miserable pain he couldn't remember ever having had before. He gritted his teeth and trotted on.

When he least expected it, Tom swung down a muddy path, slippery under the snow, and there before them was a stone-built cottage. In its welcome, it looked to Nicholas like a little castle. Around it the ground sloped steeply to the Sapey Brook, but the cottage with its thick stone walls stood sturdily, refusing to bend, as the trees seemed to do, toward the little river. Two square glazed windows appeared to smile on the world and the thick hat of its thatch was pulled down over them with a jaunty air. Tom threw the door open.

"Home, young master," he said. "At least my home. Come in and welcome."

He shut the door firmly and pressed the latch in place. He looked keenly at Nicholas and seated him in an armed chair. Nicholas tried to rise in protest and move to a stool, but he hadn't the energy.

Tom soon had a pile of dry twigs blazing on the hearth, and the buried heat beneath the ashes began to revive.

Nicholas sat listlessly. He was growing drowsy, and he no longer worried about the dampness of his clothing against his skin. Through a haze, he saw Tom swing a cauldron over the fire and the smell of stewed rabbit filled the room.

Nicholas was falling asleep. When Tom came to him and began to untie his points and unbutton his doublet, he resisted. He thought he resisted fiercely. In fact, his movements were feeble. Then he was lying on a low bed and about him was the warmth of rough blankets.

Tom was spooning a savory stew into his mouth and a glow was creeping all over his body. He was at peace with all the world, except for the pain in his right side, which worried him. He coughed, and a dagger seemed to run between his ribs. Tom laid a hand on his forehead and spoke softly to him.

Nicholas dozed, watching the flames leaping from the fire through half-closed lids. Tom moved quietly about the room, building up the fire and setting his rough pieces of furniture to rights. He began, very softly, to sing an old song of the woods. Nicholas was lulled by the melody, and his eyes closed. Tom fell silent when he was sure Nicholas was sound asleep, and he stood looking down on the boy. Nicholas's breathing was shallow, and each breath rasped in his chest. There was a worried frown on Tom's forehead.

It seemed that hours had passed when Nicholas awoke, and for a moment he could not remember where he was. The room was low and ceilinged with smoke-blackened beams. Yet it was full of a strange flat, white light. His whole body ached and the dagger was still twisting in his chest. The light hurt his eyes, and he closed them again. From somewhere there came a low murmur of voices. He heard the words, "by Puck . . ." and then the voice dropped to a mumble. He remembered that he had been wet through and that Tom had made him lie in his own bed. He was feeling so ill.

"Tom, Tom," Nicholas called hoarsely.

The door opened, flooding the room with a brightness that picked out the adz marks on the beams, and quietly shut again. Tom came and stood by the side of the bed.

"Well, young master," he asked, "feeling better?"

"There's a pain in my chest," Nicholas answered. "It hurts me when I breathe. Have I been here a long time, Tom?"

" 'Bout a couple of hours."

“I must go home. My mother and Sir James will be worried. Will you help me?” Nicholas said.

Tom smiled down at the boy very gently. “You won’t go home today nor for some days to come, young master. Couldn’t do it, no matter how you tried. There’s six inches of snow on the ground and beginning to freeze. Wouldn’t last a day if you went out in it, you wouldn’t. But you’re right that Sir James and his Lady’s got to know. How are we going to do that, now?”

“Couldn’t you get to the village?” Nicholas asked. “Is the snow too bad?”

Tom laughed. “Oh, ah, I’d get there. Take more’n this to stop me. Can’t leave you alone, though. ’Course, Evan’s here. He’d look after you.”

A spasm of pain shook Nicholas and wrinkled his eyes and pulled his mouth into a thin line. He panted for a moment.

“Please don’t leave me, Tom,” he begged. “Couldn’t Evan go?”

“He could do that. Let’s speak to him.” Tom called softly, and Evan slipped into the room.

“Caught the man who dug the trap, Evan did,” Tom said and both the men chuckled.

“Where is he?” Nicholas asked.

“Safe enough, whatever,” Evan answered.

“Now look, Evan,” Tom said. “The young master’s ill. Got a rheum in his chest, or so I reckon. He’ll have to stay here for a bit, and his mother don’t know where he is. Somebody’s got to let her know. Could you . . . ?”

“Yes. I’ll do that. But let’s have a look at him.”

Evan dropped his cloak on the floor and warmed his hands at the fire. He drew up a stool to the side of Nicholas’s low bed. With his hands clasped between his knees, he sat for a spell, listening to Nicholas’s breathing.

“Now, man,” he said, “if you’ll let me . . .” He slid a great hand beneath the blankets and touched Nicholas’s chest as gently as a woman. His fingers moved lightly over the ribs until they found a place where the gentlest pressure sent a stab of pain through the boy’s body. Evan withdrew his hand and stood up.

“Now, look you, Thomas,” he said. “The trouble with the young master’s the same as my Lord Delamere’s forester had. Ill, he was, indeed . . .”

“A physician . . .” Tom began.

“And have him bled until he’s too weak to move, whatever? That’s what my lord said, but the Lady Anne put her foot down. Better she made him in no time, man. It’s the Lady Anne the young master wants. I’ll be off. Within the hour your mother’ll be comforted.”

He picked up his cloak from the floor and slung it about his shoulders, and from a corner he took a crossbow. Tom nodded.

“A bit of my lord’s venison’s what he needs,” Tom said.

“Indeed, I had not forgotten it. Back with it I’ll be and the Lady Anne before you can say, ‘Owen Glendower.’ ”

“But the snow,” Nicholas said feebly. “Lady Anne can’t . . .” Both men laughed.

“A tomboy, indeed, she is,” Evan said.

“In and out of this valley since she was a stripling, come rain, come snow,” Tom added.

The door opened and shut softly. The latch clicked home, and Evan was gone.

Nicholas dozed and slept and awoke to doze again. Tom’s plain, rough cottage was becoming vague to him. Sometimes he opened his eyes to see the walls of his bedroom in his mother’s house in York, and he lay listening for the voices of his baby sister and the maids. Once his father came and stood by the bed, demanding that he should repeat the day’s lessons. The effort to remember was too much for him, and he closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was walking along the banks of the Yorkshire Ouse and Sir James Croome was by his side, talking about swordsmanship. He drew his sword to demonstrate a riposte and ran it through Nicholas’s chest. Nicholas fell and fell into enormous depths until he was caught in the arms of a masked man who showed him a gibbet and rows and rows of priests waiting for execution. Nicholas screamed, and from his mouth came a low, hoarse cry.

Tom’s strong hand was laid on the boy’s damp forehead. Nicholas opened his eyes and knew where he was.

“How long have I been here?” Nicholas asked.

“Twelve hours or thereabouts,” Tom answered and rasped the bristles on his chin. “Evan’ll be back in no time now.”

“What happened about the man who dug the trap?”

“Safe, if I know Evan’s knots. And in his own trap, waiting for Evan to come back,” Tom said brusquely.

Nicholas stirred uneasily in his bed. “But, Tom, there’s a lot of water there. And in all this snow, he’ll be terribly cold. He’ll die.”

“Now look, Master Nicholas. You’re not to worry yourself about him. He won’t be any too comfortable, I give you that, but he won’t die. We’d got to keep him somewhere, and we couldn’t bring him into the valley in this snow, leaving footprints everywhere.”

“Can’t you let him go,” Nicholas said wearily. “I don’t like to think of him there.”

“Well, don’t then. And we can’t let him go. Stands to reason. This man knows there’s something going on in these forests that ain’t normal. He’ll have got that from Hoarfrost. This man’s a forester, or so I reckon, and he knows his way about in the woods. Not these woods, if you see what I mean, but woods in general. Now, he spots a place where a path goes to a stream and doesn’t go on the other side. So he knows somebody comes down that path and goes upstream through the water. Why, he doesn’t know, or how. So he digs that trap and waits about to catch somebody in it. Then he’d ‘persuade’ whoever he caught to tell him all about it. That’s how he came unstuck. Waited about a bit too long, see? Waited until the snow settled. So Evan picked up his footprints, easy. There you are.”

“It’s still awful for him,” Nicholas said.

“He’d have kept you waiting there in the hole, without winking an eyelid, and don’t you worry. ’Course, that don’t make it any more easy for him, but what are we to do? We got to use this valley to hide priests. If we let him go, he’d be running back to that Hoarfrost, and we’d have a company of soldiers swarming over this country like hornets. That’d be the end of us and this valley. We can’t fight a pitched battle.”

“No, you can’t let him go, I can see that,” Nicholas said. “But — but you aren’t going to kill him, are you?”

“Look, young master, you ain’t doing yourself no good worrying about this, and that’s a fact. So I’m just going to tell you what I think and then we’ll leave it alone. You’ve got to look at it like this. The

government of this country's declared war on us Catholics. Not in so many words, of course, but that's what it comes to. What they wants is to make every Catholic give up his religion, or to see him dead or out of the country. This ain't fair because they can do what they like and, whatever they do, it's legal. Whatever we do to defend ourselves is illegal. That ties our hands, see? What's more, if we do anything they can pin on us, it gives 'em a chance for reprisals — that's doing something worse to us. Like this plot that's supposed to be started by Master Babington. Real or not, they'll make it the excuse for reprisals."

"Yes, I see," Nicholas said feebly. "They can break into our houses with pikes and swords, and if they find a priest, they'll kill him. But we can't break into their houses and kill any Protestant clergymen, or even force a priest on them."

"Exactly, you're dead right. So I won't have any bloodshed by them who work for me. I'll fight for my life if needs be, and for my church; aye, and kill and be killed if I have to do it. But I won't have a defenseless man slaughtered. That's why the life of the man in the hole's safe from us. At the same time, we can't let him go and tell what he's found out to that Hoarfrost. Bit of a job, ain't it, to know what to do with him."

"What can you do?"

"That's been all arranged. When Evan comes back, he'll take him down to the river Severn. He'll put him on board one of the river ships with friends of ours. When they get down to the sea, he'll be transferred to a big ship. Maybe he'll be landed on the coast of Spain. If he is, he'll end up on the galleys, as like as not. Not sure I wouldn't rather be finished off with a clean sword thrust. However, he chose his job and it's him or us."

The effort of talking and thinking had tired Nicholas so much that he felt he could not move his legs in the bed. His bones ached, and all

his joints felt red-hot. He could not swallow more than a few mouthfuls of stew when Tom came with a bowl and raised his head from the pillow. Everything real was going away from him again, and more strange fancies were creeping into his mind. He had a feeling that there was something in the past that was easy and comfortable, and he wanted to return to it. At the same time, he knew that in the future was struggle and hardship. He had to make a choice, and he hadn't the energy to do it.

Mists, like the fogs that had heralded the snow, drifted in and out of his head. Sometimes they took on the insubstantial shapes of forgotten schoolfellows; sometimes they were whorls and spirals without a clear form, but with some terribly urgent meaning. The ache in his bones and the steel-like agony in his chest merged into a blue mental haze of pain.

Nicholas was unconscious when Tom, standing bewildered in the midst of his cottage living room, cocked his head on one side and listened intently. It might have brought comfort to Nicholas had he been able to see the slow satisfied smile that spread across Tom's brown face when he heard voices carried clearly over the frozen snow.

The sound of human speech was followed by the sibilant hiss of sleigh runners. The cottage door burst open, and a rosy-faced Lady Anne swung in, bringing with her the cold freshness of the outside air. As she crossed the threshold, she was stripping the gloves from her fingers.

With a brief nod to Tom, she crossed the room and fell on her knees by the side of Nicholas's bed.

## Chapter 9

### Splendid Sickness

Nicholas's memories of the time he lay ill in the cottage were confused. Only a few incidents stood out sharply in his mind. He had a clear picture of the young lady who was accustomed to the gaities and artificialities of court life moving about the cottage with the unhurried efficiency of a rustic laborer's daughter. He came to accept her care of his aching body without embarrassment and even looked to her to wipe away the brown phlegm that rose to his lips when he coughed. He failed to notice how the fine white hands with their tapering fingers grew red and roughened as the days went by. He never knew that Tom swung his ax in the tangled woods for hours every day so that the fire could be kept banked high and the cottage warm in spite of windows flung wide to the frosty air. Nicholas's body was a jangled mass of pain radiating from a place of sharp agony in his chest, and it began to take charge of his mind, so that when Sir James Croome made his way into the valley, led by Tom Longbow, he was no more substantial than the vague dream shapes that peopled Nicholas's world.

Then, one day, Mr. Greenleaf came. The Lady Anne had begun to move about the cottage in the first light of the winter dawn. She scrubbed the flagged floor clean and swept the wide hearth. She dragged Tom's rough table to the side of Nicholas's bed and covered it with a white cloth and laid a linen towel across Nicholas's chest. Without a thought for Nicholas's presence, she tidied herself and sat, with her hands folded in her lap, to await the priest's coming. All the preparation stayed clearly in the boy's mind, and yet, when Mr. Greenleaf knocked softly on the cottage door, his sharp perceptions had begun to fade, and he only vaguely remembered the priest sprinkling the room with holy water and exhorting him to make his confession. By the time Mr. Green-leaf made the Sign of the Cross

over him with the Blessed Sacrament, Nicholas had fallen into a deep sleep. He heard nothing of the murmured words that passed between Mr. Greenleaf and the Lady Anne, nor the whispered inquiries from Tom, standing in the snow outside the cottage window.

Throughout the day, Nicholas slept dreamlessly and awoke in the afternoon dusk to find the room set to rights again. He stretched his legs in the bed and found that the hot pain in his joints had gone and his skin felt dry and warm and without the film of damp perspiration that had seemed a part of his existence.

“Anne,” he called softly. “Anne, I feel better.”

For the second time, the Lady Anne fell on her knees by Nicholas’s bed. She laid a hand on his forehead and then slipped it beneath the coverlets onto his chest. Then, unaccountably, she burst into tears. Nicholas laid a hand over hers and Anne could feel new vigor in its firmness. She rose to her feet, took the silver whistle Tom had given to Nicholas and, at the window, blew three shrill, but sweet, blasts on it. Then she came back to the bedside and smiled down at Nicholas through her tears.

“Do you know what day it is, Nicholas?” she asked, and in answer to Nicholas’s shake of the head, she added, “It’s Christmas Eve.”

It seemed only seconds later that the sound of running steps came from outside and Tom burst into the cottage. He stood panting.

“Is he? Is he . . . ?”

“He’s going to get better, Tom,” the Lady Anne said softly. “The crisis is past.”

Both together, Tom and the Lady Anne sat down on stools as if their knees had turned to water beneath them. They looked at one another and laughed.

“Proper worry you gave us, young master,” Tom said. “However, it’s all over now. Reckon I’d better be on me way up to Clifton. Lady Croome’ll want to know.”

He hitched his crossbow over his shoulder and slipped from the cottage door.

That night it froze hard again so that trees cracked in the woods, but with the dawn, the wind changed and Nicholas awoke to sounds of dripping water from cottage eaves and the branches of trees. Christmas Day was warm, and the sun shone with a promise of spring.

Nicholas was better, but weeks of convalescence still lay before him. He lay in bed throughout the thaw and was still confined to the cottage when the second snow fell and another frost gripped the land.

The Lady Anne remained with him, and the two discovered a companionship that was closer and more peaceable than any Nicholas had ever known. In the evenings, they sat in the firelit room while Anne told stories of the court and the fantastic queen who ruled there. Nicholas and Tom laughed to hear how the great Elizabeth of England would roundly curse her ministers of state and fling her books at their heads when she was crossed. She had even been known, the Lady Anne said, to pluck the beard of the powerful Lord Burghley himself when he tried to oppose her will. But always the talk came back to the Catholics and the unhappiness of their lives.

One night, while stars sparkled in the skies with a far-off ice-blue light and the shine from a gibbous moon spangled the snow with tiny points of cold fire, Nicholas rose to pile more logs on the hearth. He remained on his feet looking down on the Lady Anne.

“You know, Anne,” he said, “while I’ve been getting better, I’ve had time to think. I thought I’d stopped being a boy on the day I left St. Peter’s School last summer. But I hadn’t. I still went on thinking

everything was fun. Creeping in and out of this hidden valley was fun. So was planning to bring priests here secretly and making sure they'd be safe. It was all an exciting game. I think Tom Longbow finds it exciting, too. He enjoys being able to outwit the pursuivants and getting news from his friends all over England. But what I didn't know, and what Tom has never forgotten, is that it's not a game at all."

"No, Nicholas," the Lady Anne said. "It isn't a game. The stakes are too high for that."

"They're higher than I thought. For being a Catholic, a man can be ruined, imprisoned, and even killed. Many have been killed already for harboring priests. You're playing for high stakes when you gamble with your life. But it's worse than that. To take away from a man what he believes in is worse than killing his body. Why do they try to do it, Anne? Why does the queen let them?"

"Sometimes I think the queen's afraid. She's afraid of losing what she's got. Losing England, I mean. There are Catholics who would bring in Spanish help to restore the Old Faith, you know, Nicholas. The queen has known poverty and imprisonment in her youth, and she doesn't want to go back to them."

"So she forces them on those of her subjects who are Catholics," Nicholas said.

"I don't think she wants that," Anne said. "She isn't free to do what she wants. There are so many men in the government who are rich — rich because they have taken what used to belong to the Church. What would happen to them if the country became Catholic again? They are fighting to keep material things, and the queen wants material things, too. She's always in need of money. So, you see, she can't do without these men."

"There are things that are more important than riches. Tom's happy, and he owns nothing. Mr. Greenleaf's happy although there's a price

on his head. I think you're happy, Anne, even though you've worked like a servant to look after me."

"No one's happy all the time. Perhaps the best times are those when you're helping to make someone else happy."

"Then it's what I'm going to do. As soon as I'm well enough, I'll be helping Tom with his hiding places. I'll enjoy it, and it'll be fun. But I'll know that I'm really doing it because the priests need somewhere to come, and men and women in England need the priests."

January came to an end, and with its passing, the snow went, too. February brought a foretaste of spring with soft, warm rain that made the earth turn in her sleep. Nicholas climbed to the village of Clifton and visited his mother, and returned to the valley to be near to the places where he and Tom were to work. The Lady Anne stayed on in Tom's cottage. She had endured the winter there, she said, and she would not be robbed of the spring.

On a day when stately cumulus clouds sailed through a clear blue sky and all the woods were clothed in their fresh spring green, Nicholas joined Tom at the ruined village. Tom had laid his bow aside and was carrying a mattock over his shoulder.

"Now, look, young master," Tom said. "What we've done during the winter is to get the house ready up by the old church. There's room and to spare for two or three priests. It's a bit rough-like, what's ready for them, but they won't mind that, especially when they know there's a fine old church waiting for them."

"They'll be safe there, too, won't they?" Nicholas asked.

"Safe as they'd be anywhere in the country, I reckon. Now, what we've got to do is make sure there's somewhere for them if anything goes wrong. And it could do, stands to reason."

"But what could?"

“Look at it like this. The priests aren’t going to stay in this valley all the time. They’ll be off visiting Catholic families and be away for weeks, maybe months. Now suppose one of ’em gets captured by the pursuivants. And it’s pretty sure one will, sooner or later. Suppose this priest what’s captured drops a hint about what’s been done in this valley. He wouldn’t do it on purpose, of course. It might take the rack to make him talk, and that could happen. What’s the next thing?”

“The valley’ll be invaded,” Nicholas said.

“Ah. Soldiers. Lots of ’em. Now I’ve said it before and I say it again, they could get into the valley with ropes and things, but they couldn’t get in without us knowing. They’d go through this valley from end to end, and they’d see the church had been used. That’d make them mad, and they’d tear the place to pieces to find the priests. They’d see there was nowhere in the house by the church for anybody to hide. Even soldiers can see that, so they’d look for somewhere else nearby. If they found any possible place, like my cottage, say, they’d pull it down to see if there was a priest in the baking oven, so to speak. Now, what wouldn’t they pull down?”

“I don’t know,” Nicholas said.

“Why, something that’s down already. Stands to reason. Like these ruined cottages.”

“But where, in these ruins . . . ?” Nicholas began.

“Ah, now you come and see.”

Tom led the way to a ruined house. It had never been more than a four-roomed cottage and thatch and beams had fallen and rotted many years before. Portions of the stone walls had collapsed and the blocks of squared masonry lay scattered among new springing grass. The only firmly standing part of the building, the point from which the builders had started centuries before, was the great chimney, thrusting upward solid and unshakable. Tom led the way within the

walls. He thumped with the end of his mattock haft on the six-foot-wide hearthstone. It gave out a hollow sound.

“There always seems to be a hole under these things,” he said. “But don’t ask me why. Look.”

He inserted the blade of the mattock under the edge of the stone and levered it upward until he was able to pull on it with his hands. It swung upward readily and leaned in what had been the chimney corner. Underneath was a shallow hole hollowed from the soft sandstone on which the cottage had been built.

“What we do is make that hole bigger until it’ll take a man. Then if anything happens, like I said, we get the priest in there. It’s important, of course, for somebody to see the edges don’t show the stone’s been moved. Some of us what live in the valley’ll see to that. What’s more, I don’t think there ought to be more’n two priests in the valley at the same time.”

Nicholas stepped down into the depression under the hearthstone. He drew his dagger and picked at the red rock. It was soft and crumbled as he probed at it.

“All right, Tom,” he said. “I’ll get on with this. I’ve been looking forward to something.”

Day after day, Nicholas and Tom worked at the preparation of hiding places for the priests, which they hoped would never be used. And all the time, the sun climbed higher in the sky and Nicholas grew brown and strong again. A day came when Tom met Nicholas at the door of his own cottage.

“Got to leave you alone, young master, today,” he said. “There’s news coming up from the south. Something from your friend Master Philip as like as not. We’ll meet in my cottage, tonight, what do you say?”

Nicholas hardly noticed Tom's departure. He continued working on the soft red sandstone, hollowing out a place where a man could sit in comfort, and carrying the result of his labors down to the Sapey Brook so that the evidence of his digging could be washed away in the stream. When the night fell, he cleaned his tools and lowered the hearthstone into place as Tom had taught him. He arrived at the cottage to find Tom already seated on a stool and talking earnestly to Lady Anne.

"Here he is," Tom said as Nicholas came in and immediately drew up a stool to the table, where an enormous venison pie and a tall leathern jack of ale awaited him. "You carry on, young master. Sharp set, you are, after the day's work, I'll be bound." Tom turned to the Lady Anne. "What do you think of him now, my lady? Looks well, don't he?"

The Lady Anne smiled at Nicholas, who was too busy with knife and pewter to notice. "He's better than he has ever been, I think, Tom," she said. "As strong as a horse, and you should see his appetite. It's a good thing my father's deer are plentiful."

"Ah, he'll do now. Nothing like hard work in the sun and air to put a man on his feet. Just as well with a journey to do. Now, listen, Master Nicholas. I've had word from Devon. Master Philip Topsham's done a fine job of work down there. Point is, now, we've got to arrange for a chain of guides right from the coast to here. Can't bring priests ashore and then let 'em loose alone. Stands to reason. There are plenty of men to help, but they've got to be told what to do. Do this meself, I shall. All the Companions of the Notched Arrow — you might have guessed that's what we call ourselves, when we call ourselves anything at all, that is — will do anything to help. We got nothing to lose except our lives and they're cheap enough these times, by Puck. I mean none of us has got estates like Sir James Croome, or Sir Robert Lygon, or my Lord Delamere, for that matter, begging your pardon, my Lady. But like all men, the Companions has got to have a leader. That's the trouble, and I've been talking to my lady about it."

“But you’re their leader, aren’t you, Tom?” Nicholas said.

“Ah, I am that, and proud of it. But suppose something happened to me. Could be anything. Crossbow bolt in the woods, although that ain’t likely. I might run into a company of soldiers. See? There’s got to be somebody who knows all the organization if I’m gone. What my lady says is you might do it, Master Nicholas. You’re rising sixteen now and a man near enough.”

“But I don’t know all the forests and the country like you do, Tom,” Nicholas said.

“You’d soon learn, a scholar like you, with all those years at school in York behind you.” Tom smiled at Nicholas so that his white teeth flashed.

“I should have thought Philip would have been better than me, for this,” Nicholas said.

“Well, we talked about him, my lady and I did, but he’s down in the south, see? And we need him there for the time being. Knows the fishermen, and they can be an awkward cantankerous lot, those Devon men. ’Course he could do it, but he’s better there for a time, any road.”

“I’d like to help,” Nicholas said. “I’ll have to speak to Sir James and my mother . . .”

“You must see your mother, of course,” the Lady Anne said. “But it’s best that you shouldn’t explain too much to them. You can leave it to me to say what’s necessary. I’ll make it all right with them.”

“What you must understand, young master,” Tom put in, “is the fewer that know all about how we got things fixed, the better. Sir James knows me and he knows Evan, but he don’t know the red-headed man down on Cotswold and others. What he don’t know about he can’t talk about. Now, now.” Tom held up his hand as Nicholas began

to protest. "I'm saying nothing against Sir James. He's as gallant a Catholic gentleman as ever wore sword, but gentlemen talk to one another. I've known Sir Robert Lygon say things after a bottle or two of wine that I wouldn't want that Hoarfrost to hear about. So there it is."

Lady Anne said, "Don't worry, Nicholas. Sir James will understand when I've talked to him. There's another thing, too. Tom thinks I ought to take your mother and sister to stay in my father's house at Stoke Edith for a time."

Nicholas looked sharply at them both. "Why?" he asked. "Is there danger?"

Tom looked away from Nicholas into the fire. "There's always danger for us Catholics. At the same time, we got to face the fact that things are getting worse. That plot, or faked plot, of Master Babington's is still going on in London. The young fools swaggering about in taverns, boasting about what they're going to do when Queen Mary of Scotland's on the throne! Pity they ain't got more sense with Mr. Secretary Walsingham's spies listening and laughing up their sleeves. Here in Worcestershire, Hoarfrost's on the rampage again. Now he's going about with a sheriff's posse. The sheriff's a Worcestershireman and don't like London pursuivants any more than you or I do, but he's got to see the law's kept, and provide the soldiers. He'll be as easy as he can with those he's been friendly with all his life, but your mother comes from Yorkshire, and they're well known up there to be particular stubborn recusants, as they say. Ah, taking it all 'round, it's better for her to be away for a bit, out of this county."

"I expect you're right," Nicholas said. "When do we go to Devon?"

"No reason for waiting," Tom answered. "Everything's near enough ready in the valley here. What isn't, Evan can do. Might as well get off in the morning."

“Tomorrow morning! That means we’ll have to leave the cottage tonight!”

“Ah, tomorrow morning as ever is. I’ll meet you at the Knowle at the crack of dawn.”

Tom rose to his feet and settled his crossbow on his shoulder. He knuckled his forehead to the Lady Anne and made a caricature of a bow. The door closed softly behind him. A brief second afterward, it opened again and Tom looked into the room.

“There was a bit of Master Philip’s message I didn’t give you, and most particular he was that the messengers brought his exact words. ‘Give my duty and devotion to the Lady Anne,’ the message was.” Tom’s white teeth flashed in the twilight, and the door closed noiselessly once more.

Nicholas turned to the Lady Anne and was surprised to see how her eyes were brightly shining. “So it’s come to an end,” he said. “I’ve been so happy here since I began to get better. I’ve you to thank for that, my Lady Anne.”

“Not ‘my lady.’ We shall always be ‘Anne’ and ‘Nicholas’ to one another, my dear. And remember, whatever happens in the future, and wherever I am, there’ll always be a home for you, and I’ll still protect you, even if I do it with the whip that rather horrified you when we first met.”

She laid her hands on Nicholas’ shoulders and lightly kissed his cheek. “Now,” she said briskly, “there’s the fire to extinguish, and little time to spare with a long climb before us and the dead-beech bridge to cross.”

## Chapter 10

### Perilous Road to the South

In the very first light of dawn on the morrow, when even the birds were only half-awake and just attempting the first notes with which they would herald the spring sunshine, Nicholas found Tom Longbow waiting at the Knowle. Nicholas was astride the horse he had ridden that morning, weeks before, when he and Tom had set Philip Topsham on his way. He had left his mount, he remembered, in a little hut near the Sapey waterfall before he had fallen into the trap. When he asked Tom how the horse had been returned to Sir James's stables, Tom answered with the single word *Evan* and rode ahead.

Nicholas was content to follow in silence and enjoy his own feeling of well-being and to rejoice in the freshness of the countryside. All the trees were in tiny leaf except the oaks, and they had put on the burnished air that they wear with pride for a few short days before the buds burst.

They followed the same winding paths they had traveled on the chill November day with Philip, and Tom took the same precautions as he had taken before when they crossed the Upton road. As their horses' hooves drummed on the planks of Upton Bridge, Tom slackened speed slightly to allow Nicholas to draw alongside him.

"When we go through Tewkesbury, and that's only seven miles," Tom said, "it may be some men'll speak to me. Take particular note of them. They'll be friends of mine from the river Severn. They're men who sail the river ships — the trows — and they're men apart, if you see what I mean. They travel up and down this river in their ships, and they take no orders from any man, be he sheriff of the county or one of the queen's ministers of state. You can always recognize 'em. They've got legs that swell out beneath the knees like skittle pins.

That's the muscles they get from hauling their ships upstream when the wind's contrary. However, what's more important is that they're always willing to help a man in trouble, and they'll all band together to do it. If one of our friends was hidden aboard one of their ships and that Hoarfrost came looking for him, they'd stand no nonsense. Hoarfrost and all the soldiers he could gather would be tossed in the river and there wouldn't be a man who'd lift a finger to help them out. Not, mind you, because it was a friend of ours they were hiding. Dear me, no! Because when they make up their minds to do a thing, nobody's going to say them nay."

"Are they Catholics?" Nicholas asked.

Tom laughed. "That's a difficult one and no mistake. They are, I suppose, but only because it's what they used to be and nobody's going to make them change if they don't want to. If they took it in their minds they wanted to hear Mass, they'd come ashore and find a priest if he was hidden in the thickest haystack. Then they'd take him on board and make him say Mass quite openly on the deck. But they'd be just as likely to take a Protestant clergyman and make him use the missal even though he was sweating blood for the fear of doing it. A terrible, thieving, murdering lot they are and the worst enemies a man could have, but the best of faithful friends. Everybody, gentlemen and common people, 'round the river knows it and treats them with respect. Sure to see one or more of them, so keep your eyes skinned, young master."

Tom fell silent again, and the two cantered down the highroad, which was just beginning to dry after the winter snows had thawed and turned it into a dangerous morass. The river on their right hand was lost to sight, but occasionally Nicholas saw white or brown sails passing between the water meadows.

"Are those the ships?" he asked Tom.

"Ah, trows. Like I told you," Tom answered briefly.

In Tewkesbury, they dismounted for a short five minutes to drink a cup of ale at the Sign of the Bear. As they came out, a huge black-bearded man, who towered quite six inches above Tom, pulled himself upright from where he was leaning against the wall. Nicholas glanced at his legs, rising like the trunks of young trees from his turned-down boots, and knew immediately from Tom's description that he was a trowman.

"Ah, Luke," Tom said.

"Tom Longbow," the man growled in a deep bass. "Welcome to the river."

"This is young Nicholas Thorpe," Tom said. "Living up in Clifton-on-Teme. Maybe he'll be glad of the river one of these days."

"Ah," the man said. "Looks a likely lad. Maybe the river will be glad of him." A pair of piercing blue eyes swept Nicholas from head to foot. "I'll remember him. Want me to pass the word?"

"I'll be grateful for it," Tom said. "See you one day, Luke."

"Ah."

Tom and Nicholas swung themselves into their saddles. As they rounded the corner into Tewkesbury town, Nicholas glanced over his shoulder. The trowman, Luke, was already lounging against the wall again and apparently lost in meditation.

"That means," Tom said, when they were half a mile or more from the Bear, "within a matter of days, every trowmaster on the river'll know your description and your name. And they won't forget."

"They must be very fond of you, Tom, to help you like this," Nicholas said.

“ ’Tain’t so much that. The Companions have been able to do them a good turn now and again in the past, and they don’t forget that neither.”

As the day warmed, the two cantered gently along the level road that ran parallel to the river Severn. Tom seemed disinclined for conversation, and Nicholas amused himself with learning the countryside. On his right hand, the rolling curves of the Malvern Hills sank in frozen waves to the horizon, and on his left, the escarpment of Cotswold cut the sky. In between, the flat plain of Severn was crisscrossed with running streams and lush with a warm dampness.

They turned from the broad highway with its wide grass verges, where winter travelers, seeking firm going, had spread the road over bordering meadows, into a winding lane toward the village of Cheltenham at the foot of Cotswold. Tom spoke for the first time for several miles.

“You do well to know the landmarks, young master,” he said. “We’ve come safe and sound along the main road because, as I said once before, there’s always travelers on it. Time was, and not so very long ago neither, when it was crowded with pilgrims on their way to Gloucester. Now most travelers are rich merchants going to Bristol. People here are used to seeing folk about, and strangers at that. But you mark my words, we shan’t be able to ride openly on this road much longer. The time’s coming when every main road in the kingdom’ll be watched and picketed.”

“Why do you think that will be done?” Nicholas asked.

“Stands to reason. A plot to put the Lady Mary of Scotland on the English throne would have to be supported by a Catholic uprising. Catholic gentlemen would have to take horse and arm their servants and tenants in every county of England. Then they’d have to meet somewhere, and county by county, join together and march on London. ’Course, they’d pretend some excuse for meeting, like having

a friendly hunt together or something, but the real reason would be obvious to the government. What does the government do? Send out men and arrest every Catholic traveler moving about without a permit. I say again, whether Mr. Babington's plot is real or faked, it makes no difference. It gives the government the excuse they want."

"I can't see why the government needs an excuse," Nicholas said. "They're strong enough to do what they want, aren't they?"

"Then I'll tell you why, young master. Maybe you haven't realized it yet, but England ain't divided into just two camps. There's Catholics like me who'd go to endless trouble to have a church and a priest nearby. I'll work for it till I die, though maybe I'll never see the time again. But you got to realize there's Protestants who feel the same way. Some of them think they know the truth, and they'll work for it till they die, too. Aye, and they did die in their hundreds back in the days of Queen Mary. They've already started to call her Bloody Mary. But in between the two, there's thousands of Englishmen who don't feel as strongly either way."

Tom stopped and rubbed the back of his head with his hand. "Look," he continued, "they go to church and listen to a parson reading the new prayer book because it's the law and they're law-abiding citizens. If it was the law, they'd go to church with their missals in their hands and perhaps be secretly glad of it because they, or their fathers and mothers, were brought up that way. But they ain't going to stand up sword in hand and fight for it. There's one thing they won't stand for, though, and that's something that ain't fair play. The government could send out soldiers and pick up every Catholic in the land and hang him and draw him and quarter him, and some of them would like to do it. And if they did, what'd happen? Johnny Citizen in Worcester, or Gloucester, or London would get up and say, 'Look, masters, three hundred Catholics have been killed in my town this last month. What for?' Suppose the government said, 'Because they're Papists, that's why,' then Johnny'd say, 'So what? So were my father and mother. You stop it, or we will,' and the swords'd be out with a

vengeance. If the government said, 'They made a plot to kill our Lady Queen Elizabeth and put the Lady Mary of Scotland on the throne. That means you'd have had a lot of haughty Dons from Spain to rule over you.' Then Johnny says, 'Ah, that's different. Can't have that. England for the English,' and back the swords go in the thatch. See?"

"All these that are in the middle," Nicholas asked, "couldn't the priests bring them back into the Old Faith?"

"Ah, maybe you got something there. There's two ways for the government to go about it. Work up some excuse against us and kill and kill and kill. They'll do that if they can. The other way is to see there's no priests in the country. When there's no priests, there's no sacraments and people begin to forget. It's happening now."

"Then it's easy to know what to do," said Nicholas. "First, we've got to be sure we don't give any excuse for killing Catholics, except where it can't be helped, like having a priest in our houses. And second, we must help more priests into the country and keep them as safe as we can."

Tom's eyes were wide and his mouth hung open in surprise. "Ain't that what we've been doing these months back?" he asked.

Nicholas did not hear a word. He had slackened speed and was riding with his head cocked on one side listening intently. His young ears had caught a faint and far-off sound of a trumpet. Suddenly Tom pulled back his horse almost onto its haunches as a man with a longbow in his hand stepped into the road. An arrow was fitted to the bowstring, but the bow was not drawn taut. Nicholas saw that the yard-long shaft was marked with three groups of three white notches. When he glanced at Tom, he saw that in his hand there was a similarly notched crossbow bolt, and Tom was bending from his saddle talking earnestly. The man's speech was thick with a Cotswold burr, and Nicholas could distinguish only a few words.

“Pursuivants . . .” he heard. “Master Jack Marshall’s house . . . this morning . . . See the smoke over there.”

Tom muttered a few words.

“By way of the woods . . .” Nicholas heard again. “. . . Birdlip Hill . . .”

The man pointed and Tom nodded, gestured to Nicholas, and lulled his horse off the road to the right. For hours the two rode in single file between the ancient trees that clothed the Cotswold escarpment. Nicholas found he had no time to watch the country through which they were passing. He was too busy guiding his horse between trunks and bending over his steed’s neck to avoid low branches. In places, the hillside grew so steep that they were obliged to dismount and climb with a hand on the bridles. They were taking an oblique way upward, and when they seemed to have reached a summit, another valley opened before them and they were forced to descend and climb again.

For hours they walked and rode and heard no sound but the swish of their feet and the horses’ hooves through the last autumn’s leaves, until at last, in the late afternoon, they reached high and level ground. The trees thinned before them and Tom drew rein at the edge of the forest.

In spite of his new strength, Nicholas found that his muscles were stretched and sore and his back ached with mounting, dismounting, and bending beneath branches. He sighed with thankfulness for a moment’s stillness and with pleasure at the peaceful scene before them.

In a little depression in the high plateau, there clustered the few thatched and half-timbered houses of a small hamlet. They were gathered about the skirts of a little church whose stones, through centuries of Cotswold sun and wind, had weathered to soft pastel shades that glowed in the sunlight. In the little acre about its walls

were planted dark-green yews. Cottage doors were open, and from them came all the homely sounds of village life. Near to where Tom and Nicholas sat their horses stood a house somewhat larger than the cottages. The pale flowers of convolvulus sprawled over its black-and-white walls and spilled their waxen elegance over lintel and windowsill. Before it, in the midst of a little green, grew a spreading chestnut, with all its white candle flowers burning bravely, and its mighty bole was encircled by a rustic seat. As they watched, a tall thin man emerged from the doorway and made his way to the seat under the tree. In one hand he carried a mighty pewter tankard, and in the fingers of the other was a flute. He sat himself down, refreshed himself from the tankard, and began to play "My Lady Greensleeves" on his flute. In the sunshine, his hair burned a fiery red. Tom let out a whoop of delight.

"The sign of the Hundred Yews," he said, "and all's well."

Nicholas, fed and his thirst quenched, sat beneath the chestnut with Tom and his redheaded friend, while the sunshine lasted, and listened to their talk. He was only half-attending and letting his mind wander among the events that had taken place during the months since he had left St. Peter's School. At last, everything was becoming clear to him, and there was a reason for all that he was doing. He went to bed at sundown and slept like a child until Tom shook his shoulder at dawn the next morning.

Three of them left the inn at Painswick when the sky was just touched with rose pink. First there rode the redheaded man with Nicholas at his side, and as they went, he pointed out landmarks by which the way could be recognized, to abandoned quarries, to deep and trackless forest, or to charcoal-burners' huts, where shelter could be found in times of danger. Tom followed close behind, and on his brown face was a happy smile. They avoided the town of Stroud and by early afternoon came to the highest ground of all.

It seemed to Nicholas that they rode across an endless circular plain that was made up of stony grassland dotted with occasional clumps of pines. Herds of sturdy sheep with heavy fleeces grazed and bleated at the sound of hooves. Occasionally a man rose from behind a tiny rock-built shelter as they approached and, when he saw the redheaded man, sank down out of sight again. Without ceasing, the wind moaned about them, numbing mind and feeling. After a few hours, Nicholas felt that he had been riding in it for weeks. It sang in his ears when they dismounted to drink the clear water in a rocky rill. He still heard the sound when the three sat down to eat bread and cheese in a lonely hut, and it moaned still about the timbers as Nicholas settled to sleep in the hay that was the only bed the place provided.

The next morning was the same, until they came to where the land fell away before them into, it seemed, a new world of bright-green trees and lush grassy valleys. Away on their right, a smudge of smoke marked where a large town lay.

“City of Bath,” the redheaded man said laconically. “Not safe.”

They left the smudge of smoke far away to their right and, riding downhill, crossed the old Roman road that ran, eventually, to London. Near that road, the red-headed man left them to return across the wind-swept loneliness of Cotswold heights, and Tom and Nicholas galloped on to find shelter in another tiny hamlet. There Tom found again one of the Companions of the Notched Arrow, and the same half-whispered conversations took place. Nicholas stored away in his memory a new catalogue of hiding places and safe refuges.

Toward the end of the fourth day from home, Nicholas and Tom were trotting quietly at the edge of an oak forest bordering lush grassland, and Nicholas was admiring the fat cattle, twice as big, he thought, as the shaggy long-horned steers that lived near his own home, when a sudden movement caught his eye. The movement was sharp and quick, and Nicholas had no time to recognize what had attracted his

attention. All he knew was that something had disappeared among the trees. He laid a hand on Tom's knee.

"There's a man, I think. Just gone into the forest. Looks as if he's trying to hide," he said.

Tom slung his crossbow from his shoulder and slipped a bolt into the guides. He motioned to Nicholas to drop behind and leave him a clear field of fire. Nicholas loosened his sword in its sheath. The horses eased their pace to a walk. Suddenly Tom drew rein and pointed to where undergrowth was broken and fall leaves were scattered. He slipped a leg over his saddle, tossed his bridle to Nicholas, and with his crossbow at the ready, disappeared among the trees. In the space of a minute, he returned, leading a limping horse by the bridle, and he was followed by a dejected young man, dressed in soiled and tattered finery. As he walked, the man shivered violently, and his teeth chattered. Tom unstrung his bow and toyed with a notched arrow. The man watched him apprehensively, but there was no gleam of understanding in his eyes. Tom shrugged his shoulders and put away the quarrel in his quiver.

"Didn't want us to see you. I wonder why," Tom said.

"I'm a sick man, and my horse is lame. All I ask is to go my way in peace. That's why I tried to hide from you," the man answered.

Nicholas lifted his head quickly.

"You're a Yorkshireman. I can tell from your speech," he said sharply.

"Ah, that's what it is," Tom said. "Tell the young master your name, and no lies now."

The man put a hand on the pommel of his saddle for support and shook more violently.

“Harrington. William Harrington,” he said and could speak no more. After a few moments, the chattering of his teeth subsided.

“Of York,” he managed to add.

“Whereabouts in York?” Nicholas asked.

“Of Coney Street. It runs from the end of the Stonegate to Coppergate.”

“He’s right,” Nicholas said to Tom. “And Harringtons are a staunch Catholic family. One of them went overseas to Douai or Rome, I forget which, to become a priest. His name was William Harrington, too, I believe.

As his shivering subsided, the man Harrington appeared too weak to stand. He sat down on the ground with his head bowed and his hands hanging listlessly over his knees.

“So we’ve caught a Papist, have we?” Tom said. “Maybe a priest, as well. I thought it might be. Now what’ve you got to say?”

The man raised sad eyes to Tom.

“I can’t struggle any more. Do what you will with me. Two or three days ago, I caught a fever, and last night I spent several hours clinging to the inside of a cottage chimney while a pursuivant and his men made merry below. Now I’m too ill to care, or to deny anything. Yes, I’m a priest. Take me away. I’ll be proud to follow my master, Edmund Campion. It’s five years now since you martyred him, and I thank God I’ve had a little time to help with his work.”

William Harrington’s head sank on his chest and his shivering began again. Tom unstrapped a saddlebag and produced a small flask of cognac and some of the coarse bread and cheese with which he and Nicholas refreshed themselves on the road.

“Look after him, young master. I’ll see to his horse.”

As Nicholas held the mouth of the flask between William Harrington’s chattering teeth, Tom ran his hands gently over the lame horse’s hocks and fetlocks. He spoke quietly to Nicholas as he worked.

“No swelling here. Nothing wrong as I can see.” Tom raised the horse’s feet one by one and hissed between his teeth for a moment. He drew his dagger and picked gently at a hoof. A small jagged flint fell to the ground and Tom stood upright. He looked down on the kneeling Nicholas, and saw that the fiery spirit had brought a flush to the priest’s hollow cheeks. “See what a waste it is, young master. They come over here knowing what’s in store for ’em if they’re caught. And, of course, they get caught. If only they’d find out something about the Companions first, they’d have a better chance. But they won’t bother, whatever we try to do.” He bent over and took the priest’s hands in his steel grasp. “There’s naught wrong with your horse. If you can sit in the saddle for a couple of hours, we’ll have you warm in bed, Father.”

“Father . . . ?” the priest began, and his eyes filled with tears.

“Aye,” Tom said gently. “You’re safe with us.”

A little more than two hours later, Tom and Nicholas, with Father Harrington limp in his saddle between them, skirted the long straggling village of Chard, and made their way through a spinney into Sir Edward North’s gardens. A gardener was tending a huge bonfire and seized a long billhook when he saw the three horsemen approach. Tom tossed him a notched bolt and the gardener’s face broke into a welcoming smile. Sir Edward came limping from the house.

“If you’re seeking shelter, you’ve come to a poor place. A pursuivant and his ruffians were here last night. This” — Sir Edward gestured toward the pile of wood the gardener was burning — “was my paneling. Stripped from the walls and splintered by the light of

torches. There's scarcely a floor board left on the joists. However, the walls are still standing, and they got something to remember me by even if I did get a pike thrust in the thigh." His keen eyes glanced at the priest, still drooping in his saddle. "Hello, this man's sick. Who is he?"

In a few brief words, Tom explained the situation, and Sir Edward became all solicitude. Father William Harrington was tucked up in bed in the gardener's quarters, Tom disappeared to find the nearest Companion of the Notched Arrow, and Nicholas followed Sir Edward into the house. He was appalled at the destruction. Where once there had been delicately carved paneling, bare brick walls showed, furniture had been tossed aside, and untidy piles of floor boards against the walls left joists bare through which it was possible to glimpse Sir Edward's cellars.

Sir Edward struggled to his curved marble staircase and on the bottom step bowed Nicholas onward as if into a palace.

"And after all this, they found nothing," he said. "Unintelligent creatures, pursuivants."

The following morning, Tom and Nicholas left Father Harrington in Sir Edward's charge and rode into Devon. They stabled their horses at a remote inn and met the last of the Companions who was to guide them to the end of their journey. He led them through a maze of deep lanes cut, like trenches, through meadows and woods, and winding and intersecting so crazily that Nicholas lost all sense of direction. At last their silent guide climbed the turfed bank of a lane, pointed to a faintly marked path leading steeply downward through dense woods, and disappeared between the trees. Tom and Nicholas stood in silence for a moment, listening to the trills of birdsong and the plash of running water, and looking after their disappearing guide. Tom shrugged his shoulders and said, "Takes all sorts to make a world," and marched on down the steep path.

Suddenly a bell clanged above the travelers' heads, and Tom stopped abruptly, slinging his bow from his shoulder and sliding a bolt from his quiver in one swift movement. A merry peal of laughter rang through the woods, and Philip Topsham stepped into the path.

"Welcome to Devon, both of you," he said. "I thought I'd play my old trick on you. Come to my cave, and I'll make amends."

## Chapter 11

### Darksome Cave

The entrance to Philip's cave looked like the opening of a disused mine. A shaft ran obliquely into the steep hillside, and the walls and roof of the tunnel were shored up by balks of heavy timber. Philip led the way, and after a few yards, when both Nicholas and Tom were fumbling in the darkness, he told them over his shoulder to wait, without moving. Nicholas sensed rather than saw that the bulk of Philip's body had disappeared from before him, and he had a feeling, too, that a black void lay in front. He turned and saw Tom silhouetted against the brightness of the opening, which seemed far away. A faint strip of light showed in the wall of the tunnel, and Philip's voice came hollowly, bidding them enter. Nicholas saw that there was a gap between two of the balks of timber, and on the other side Philip stood, holding a lighted candle. Nicholas squeezed between the wooden posts and found himself in a narrow passage that turned at right angles after half a dozen steps, and led into a rock-hewn chamber. It was furnished sparsely with a table, stools, and truckle beds. The air felt quite fresh, but warm and faintly scented with dry bracken.

"If you hang a brown blanket between the posts you came through, it's impossible to tell there's any way to this place," Philip said, and paused to light two more candles on the table. "Now look." Holding a candle shoulder high, he led the way to a corner of the chamber where a low Gothic arch had been cut. He stooped and passed through, followed by Nicholas and Tom, and held the candle above his head. The feeble light showed an inner room, and its appearance caused both Tom and Nicholas to catch their breath with surprise.

The walls of the inner chamber were formed of living rock, and by some accident of its formation, they were covered with tiny crystals

from which the candle beams struck points of scintillating light. Even more surprising was that against one wall stood a waist-high altar-shaped block of stone, and it was partially concealed by an embroidered frontal. On its top, standing on a fair white cloth, were candles in tall sticks and all the vessels for the Mass. Philip laughed at his companions' amazement and led the way back into the outer room. They sat in the candlelight on stools around the table.

"You see," Philip told them, "this place is as safe and secret as friend Tom's valley. Nobody knows about this room and the little chapel I made there, except me. My mother's maid, Dorothy, knows there's a place here where I used to come as a boy, but she's never been inside and she wouldn't put foot in the tunnel. You must understand that Devon's different from other parts of England, as Cornwall is, and the people are different, too. Nobody knows who made these mines — if they are mines. But there's a legend they were made in the days of the old religions. I mean before Christianity came to England. There's quite a number of them about. Devon men think of them as entrances to some sort of pagan hell. None of the local people come near them. So you see there's only the possibility of pursuivants finding them and thinking they're hiding places. Suppose one of them came here. I've told you it's impossible to see the side entrance unless you know where it is, when a blanket's hung between the posts. You can try it for yourself if you want. If you miss it and go on down the shaft, you come to a place where the floor stops and there's a vertical drop. You can toss a stone down there and count twenty before you hear a faint splash of water. Well, if a pursuivant did come . . ."

Philip stopped and shrugged his shoulders.

"This is wonderful, Master Philip. Never known better, by Puck." Tom's teeth suddenly gleamed white in the candlelight. "Suppose I oughtn't to use that name in here."

“No, better not,” Philip answered quite seriously. “What I thought is this. When priests come ashore, some of them might well be sick or sorry men if there’s anything of a sea running. They mightn’t be able to go on into the country straightaway. What’s more, there’s a pursuivant down here who’s the most cunning, vicious rogue I ever came across. George Pigeon’s his name, and he’s worse than Hoarfrost. So it might be necessary for any priests to lie up for a few days. This is just the place for them, and I made the inside room into a chapel because I thought it would help. In any case, it wouldn’t do any harm to have a few Masses said here, in case there’s anything in the old tales.”

“Are you expecting any priests soon?” Nicholas asked.

“Not for about a week. And you don’t mention priests when there’s any fishermen about. You just say ‘cargo.’ ”

“That’s wise. Stands to reason,” Tom said.

“The man Pigeon I spoke about, and his men, have been very interested in Branscombe Cove recently and getting about the cliffs a bit too much, so I thought you two had better lie here for a few days. There’s bread, meat, and hard-boiled eggs in that box over there and water you fetch from the brook. When it gets near dusk, I’ll come for you and you can have a proper meal at the house.”

“Won’t this Pigeon be about then? Should’ve thought it the best time for him,” Tom said.

“Yes, he thought the same,” Philip answered. “But he’s made himself mighty unpopular down here and so have his men, with Catholic and Protestant alike. They’ve billeted themselves in the cottages and there’s been trouble between them and the fishermen’s wives when the husbands have been at sea. Well, there was one of them patrolling the cliffs a week or two ago, and he had an accident and fell over. Nobody was seen near him, so perhaps it was an accident. But I’ve seen the way the Devon faces freeze when he’s mentioned,

so I have my doubts. Anyway, even Pigeon can't persuade the men to go out after sundown now, so it'll be all right for you; besides, I want some of my men to see you."

Philip took his departure, and Tom and Nicholas took food outside to sit and eat in the warm Devon sunshine.

Philip came for them soon after sunset and, on the way to his mother's house, showed them his second hiding place. He and a neighboring farmer had dug a large hole and roofed it with trunks of trees. Over these the farmer had built a hay rick, and a tunnel led from the hidden hole underneath the stables and ended in a trap door concealed beneath the horses' straw.

"This is pretty safe, too, I think," Philip said. "But it isn't as comfortable as the cave. A lot of little insects drop down from the hay up above. Perhaps we shall not need to use it, but it's a good thing to have more than one place. After all, it's not so much the risk of a hiding place being discovered as the danger of the 'cargo' being seen on the way from the shore."

"What have you done about that, young Master Philip?" Tom asked.

"There isn't very much you can do except rely on darkness and silence. But I have arranged for a diversion in case Pigeon or any of his men come spying 'round when we're landing a 'cargo.' You'll see how that works when the time comes. It won't be long now.

The *Seamew* sailed for the coast of France ten days ago, and allowing time for some fishing on the way back, she'll be here in about a week."

"How will you know when she comes?" Nicholas asked.

"By keeping a lookout, of course. Any of the local men can recognize her at a glance, but I doubt if Pigeon's landlubbers could. Anyway, to be on the safe side, she'll make her landfall a good way to the east of

here and then turn and sail straight across the bay as if she were going to Plymouth. When she's out of sight, she'll heave to and wait for dark, and then come back here. We'll be waiting for her. It'll work all right. You'll see when the time comes."

But the time did not come in a week, or in a fortnight. Tom and Nicholas filled their days by exploring the many narrow sunken lanes near Branscombe until they knew them well enough to find their way about in darkness. Sometimes they walked as far as five miles inland to meet Companions of the Notched Arrow in the dim parlors of remote inns. After dark, Philip came to the cave with supplies of food, and the three sat in the rock room and talked. It was evident that Philip was becoming worried and nervous about the delay, and at last Tom ruled that they should not talk about their plans. To Nicholas this did not seem a change for the better because it appeared to him that Philip wanted to hear over and over again all about his illness and everything that the Lady Anne Delamere had said and done.

At last, the day came when Philip came quite openly to the cave in early afternoon. He carried with him sticks of charcoal and the news that the *Seamew* had sailed across the bay flying the pennant that meant she had a "cargo" on board. He put the charcoal down on the cave table.

"This is to black your hands and face so they won't show white. Come down to the Hall an hour after sunset, and I'll be waiting for you," Philip said with all trace of nervousness gone now that the hour for action was at hand. For the first time since he came to Devon, Nicholas found the minutes dragged by so slowly that he thought that darkness would never come. His face was blacked, and he was waiting impatiently a full hour before the sun set. It still seemed like a week before Tom gave the word for the start.

The few scattered cottages of the village were silent and in darkness when Tom and Nicholas passed them, but Tom stopped near each and listened before they crept by on the other side of the road. A thin

crescent moon came from behind clouds and shed a faint ghostly light over the coomb as they met Philip. Under his arm was what appeared to be a bundle of rope.

“Rope ladder,” he breathed in a voice that was not even a whisper.

In single file, the three climbed the steep sides of the valley, leaving the little harbor on their right hand, passing beneath trees until they reached the furze-clad summit of the down. The noise of the sea, eternally beating at the foot of the cliffs, was loud in their ears. Suddenly, as they were threading their way between the golden-blossomed bushes, Philip stopped, and drew Nicholas and Tom to either side of him.

“Look,” he breathed and pointed to where a solitary pine grew near the edge of the cliff.

To Nicholas, looking along Philip’s outstretched arm, it seemed that the trunk of the tree was curiously deformed. Then a movement caught his eye and a dark shadow detached itself from the silhouette of the pine. He saw that it was a watching man.

“Down in the bushes,” Philip whispered. “And keep down. I’ll be back soon.”

Nicholas felt the bundle of the rope ladder pushed into his arms, and Philip was gone without a sound. From where Tom and Nicholas lay on the short turf, with clumps of furze and bramble between them and the edge of the cliff, they could see the topmost branches of the pine, but not the watching man beneath. On their right, they could look down on Branscombe Cove and see a triangle of luminous sea. Suddenly a flame flickered on the beach beyond the harbor, died, and came to life again and was joined by others until a fire of driftwood was burning merrily on the pebbles. Shadows of men moved about it, and in its light, Nicholas saw a boat drawn clear of the sea. He half-rose to his knees in consternation, and Tom’s hand forced him down again. The turf was pounded by running feet, and a man cursed as

his clothing was caught by thorns. The sound of his sliding, stumbling passage down the steep sides of the coomb was marked with more curses. Tom's shoulders were shaking, and Nicholas put out a hand to him.

"Are you all right, Tom?" he asked.

"Ah . . . just laughing!" Tom answered.

There came a burst of voices from the beach where the fire burned. Tom stood up and pulled Nicholas to his feet. Below, the silhouettes of men that had been grouped around the fire were spread out in a line toward the sea and the boat that lay out of reach of the waves. One was in front, running. Tom and Nicholas saw the dark form of the first man reach the boat, and as he did so, the others bunched together and stopped. The man by the boat appeared to stoop, grope, and then drag a bulky and heavy object from the stern sheets. Again he stooped, and a howl of pain tore the air. It was followed by shouts of laughter, and the man nearest the sea left the bulky object lying on the beach and disappeared toward the village. Five minutes later, Philip joined them, the flash of white teeth showing in his blackened face.

"That was my diversion," he said laughing. "The man up by the pine was Pigeon watching the *Seamew*. I went down and warned the men. He thought he'd found us landing what he called 'popish baubles.' He was sure when he found the sack in the boat."

"What was in it, then?" Nicholas asked.

"He found out when he put his hand in," Philip said. "It was live lobsters."

Philip gathered up the rope ladder and went to make its end fast to the bole of the pine. Nicholas, at his side, looked down over the cliff edge. An anchored lugger was rocking gently in the swell, and a small

boat was just leaving its side. Philip tossed the end of the ladder over the cliff.

“You’d better come down with me, Nicholas,” he said. “They’re troublesome things, these rope ladders, and you can climb up again with the priest. I’ll hold the end as taut as I can, and Tom can help you over the edge. Ready?”

Nicholas followed Philip over the brink of the down, glad that the hand of Philip below him guided his feet onto the sagging, swaying rungs of the ladder. He saw that the cliff curved inward, and there seemed to be nothing about him but empty air and below only the sigh and splash of the Atlantic swell among the rocks. Sea gulls awoke and swept from their rocky homes with plaintive cries. Immediately the calls of the sea birds were answered by others near the beach and harbor.

“That’s the men crying like gulls,” Philip said from lower down the ladder. “So Pigeon won’t know where the disturbance is. We’re almost there.”

The cliff swelled out, and Nicholas found he was standing on a ledge of rock. Every now and again, a wave, higher than others, rose and hissed over it. The small boat was feeling its way toward the shore, and a man in its bows was standing with a rope coiled ready in his hand. The rope snaked toward the cliff, and Philip caught it and took a turn around an iron pin driven into the rock.

A second man rose from behind the rower, and as the boat swung close to the ledge on the crest of a roller, he stepped lightly ashore.

“All safe, Francis,” Philip called and tossed the painter back into the boat. “Now, Father. Up the rope ladder! Nicholas here will climb with you, and Tom will help you over the edge. Off you go.”

Step by step, Nicholas climbed with his arms on either side of the priest’s waist. He hung on grimly as the rope jerked violently when

Tom hauled the priest onto the turf. Then Tom's hand reached down for him. A moment later, Philip was kneeling on the cliff top, coiling the rope ladder, and Nicholas saw that the lugger was already standing out to sea.

Half an hour's rapid walk through the woods brought all four safely to the cave. The candles were lighted on the table, and Nicholas began to lay out food for all of them. He looked over his shoulder and saw Philip leading the priest through the low arch into the chapel. He laid down the dish in his hands and quietly followed.

For a full week, the three lay in the cave while Pigeon intensified his persecutions in revenge for his humiliation on the beach. Philip's house was roughly searched, and mattresses and featherbeds slit open in the pretense that they might have been used as the hiding places for "popish baubles." The fishermen were questioned hour after hour, but the pursuivant made no progress against the Devon stubbornness. Nicholas served the newly arrived priest's Mass every morning, and the remainder of the day was spent in conversation just outside the entrance to the tunnel. At last, Pigeon was forced to admit there was nothing for him to find out, or if there were, it was too well concealed for him to discover. He withdrew his men to harass another part of the Devon coast.

Philip watched their departure, and when it was sure that it was not a trick to lure the priest from his hiding place, he came quickly to urge an immediate start. He brought a horse for the priest, and Tom and Nicholas recovered theirs from the stables of the inn, and the journey for the Sapey Valley began. They lay the first night at Chard and found Father William Harrington recovered from his fever and anxious to resume once more his mission to the oppressed English Catholics. During the evening of their arrival, Tom drew Nicholas aside into Sir Edward North's garden.

"Listen, young master," Tom said. "I've been thinking. A party of four's too many for the journey we made coming down. We'll have to split

forces. If we're stopped on the road, two might get away where four wouldn't. Then there's the question of accommodation in the little inns we're forced to use. What d'you say?"

"I expect you're right, Tom," Nicholas answered. "What shall we do? Will you go on with one priest while I wait for a few days and follow with the other?"

"Better go different ways. If we got caught, all the pursuivants in that area'd be alert, stands to reason. Now look."

Tom squatted on his heels and patted level an area of cultivated soil with the palm of his hand. He drew his dagger and with it made a rough map on the earth.

"This here's Chard," he said, digging a hole with the point of his dagger. "A bit west of north is Taunton — here. That's a big town, and you've got to avoid it. It's the headquarters of the pursuivants in the County of Somerset. So keep to the woods going due north, and you'll leave it on your left. Then you'll come, in time, to a little town called Bridgewater. Used to be called Bridge Walter 'cause Walter of Douai built the bridge there hundreds of years ago, but you know how names get changed. Bridgewater stands on a river called the Parrett, and you can sail a ship in and out at high tide, but it's just a trickle of water running between mud banks at others. You can ride through Bridgewater streets because it's always full of trow-men, and go on down the road that runs alongside the estuary till you come to the Parrett Inn. The landlord's a Companion. Tell him you want to get up the river Severn and be landed at Pixham. That's upstream from Upton, and you'll recognize the landmarks. From there, you go to the valley and get in by way of the waterfall. The landlord'll put you in touch with trow-masters, and you just mention that you've met Luke and tell them your own name. Want to ask any questions?"

"Yes," Nicholas answered. "Which priest am I to go with?"

“Father Harrington, I should think. You’re both Yorkshiremen,” Tom said with his flash of white teeth from brown face.

“Suppose I miss the way? What happens then?” Nicholas asked.

“You won’t, not after what I’ve taught you,” Tom answered. “You’re going north, and you’ve got the stars by night and the sun by day. But if the worse comes to the worst, you’ll have to find one of the Companions in a country inn. I’ll give you a notched arrow. All right?”

“Yes. There’s only one more thing that bothers me, and that’s the waterfall way into the valley. Somehow I don’t fancy it anymore,” said Nicholas.

“I can understand that. Learned a lesson over that, I did, too. You’ll find two long cloaks under the bracken in the shelter where we stabled our horses. Put them on, and leave them in my cottage. Evan’ll dry them and get them back. Anything else, young master?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ll do my best, Tom,” Nicholas said.

Tom rose to his feet, thrust his dagger into his belt, and clapped Nicholas on the shoulder.

“Right! We’ll be off as soon as the priests have said their Masses in the morning.”

Nicholas and Father Harrington took their journey in easy stages, riding through the green woods and rejoicing in the warmth of the summer. Father Harrington grew daily in strength and became ashamed of his weakness and the feelings of defeat that he had had when he had first met Nicholas, and Nicholas learned for the first time how the constancy of the priest can depend on the strength of the man. It made him wonder about the fortitude of those who held firmly to their faith under the torture of the rack and the prospect of an agonizing death at an executioner’s hands. New ideas came to him

fast, and he glimpsed an existence that was outside anything he had known before.

On the evening of the third day, they reached Bridgewater and rode through the town without hindrance to receive a welcome at the inn on the estuary of the river Parrett. There was no need for Nicholas to ask the landlord of the inn for any trowmen who might be about. A hand was placed on his shoulder before he and Father Harrington sat down to supper. He turned, and saw a man with the characteristic swelling calves of those who earned their living sailing in the Severn trows.

“Young Nicholas Thorpe?” the man asked, neglecting to use any title, as did all of his kind. “Reckon I’ve heard of you from Luke of the Water Witch. That right?”

“Yes, I’m Nicholas Thorpe, and I’ve met Luke, although I didn’t know the name of his ship.”

“Trow’s what you mean. This a friend o’ yours?”

“Yes. His name’s . . .”

“Name me no names,” the man said quickly. “Looking for a passage, I reckon.” Then, in reply to Nicholas’s nod, he added, “Up or downstream?”

“To a place called Pixham,” Nicholas answered.

“Summat to do with Tom Longbow, that means. Ar, I knows me way about. Cost you five silver shillings. Each apiece.”

Nicholas fumbled in his doublet, and the trowman laughed.

“Leave it, leave it. Just wanted to know if you was willing. Here’s the supper. Sit down.”

The man pulled a stool up to the table and sat without a “by your leave,” and began to cut himself food with his own gleaming knife, which seemed half as long as a rapier.

“Nobody else in here, youngster,” he growled to the serving-maid, and began to talk to Nicholas with his mouth full. “Can’t stay here, you can’t, no longer’n it takes you to fill your bellies.”

“But Tom said the landlord was friendly,” Nicholas said.

“Friendly? ’Course he’s friendly. ’Tain’t him. Reckon you’ve been out o’ touch with things.”

“Yes,” Nicholas answered. “We’ve been down in Devon for some weeks.”

“I don’t want to know where you’ve been. You give too much away. Bad ’abit to get into. Thing is, you don’t know. I’ll tell you, quick. Get some food under your belts.” The trowman pushed bread toward Nicholas with the point of his knife. “Things ’ave ’appened up London way. A plot, there was, to murder the queen by a lot o’ young nobs. They’ve been arrested and clapped in the Tower, where they’re lying at this very minute on the rack, or hanging up by the thumbs, as like as not.”

“Mr. Anthony Babington?” Nicholas asked.

“Summat like that. I don’t know nothing about it, and I don’t want to. What I do know is there’s about a couple o’ hundred soldiers up in Highbridge. Leastways there was this afternoon, and that’s only seven mile away. Three men I saw meself dancing in air on the end of ropes. Papists, they said they was, who’d been planning a rising, though I knew ’em for naught but honest fishermen. Leastways as honest as any fisherman is.”

The trowman stopped to laugh, and Father Harrington bent his head and crossed himself. The trowman looked at him through narrowed

eyes.

“Give as much away as the young’n here, you do,” he said scornfully. “By now them soldiers is on their way to Bridgewater, and there’ll be a few more choking their lives out there come sundown. They won’t leave this inn alone, neither. So you can’t stay here, like I said. Not unless you’ve a fancy for a rope collar and your faces up against the sign of this house.”

“What can we do?” Nicholas asked and pushed back his stool.

“Can’t take you off in no trow neither, not till next tide.”

Nicholas jumped to his feet and loosened his sword in its scabbard. “Father . . .” he began. The trowman interrupted.

“Can’t take you off in no trow, is what I said. Take you off in a flatner. Put you ashore on Steepholm. That’s an island a goodish bit offshore. Pick you up in a trow tomorrow morning. What d’you say?”

“I think we ought to go — now! There’s no other way of escape,” Father Harrington said.

“ ’S right. Ain’t got no choice, ’ave you. Take summat to eat, and we’re off. Gets a bit chilly on Steepholm, nights, when your belly’s empty.”

Nicholas and Father Harrington stuffed bread and meat into the bosoms of their doublets, dropped coins on the inn table, and followed the trowman from the inn. They crossed mud flats into which they sank over their ankles to where a flat-bottomed boat, like a dory, was resting.

“That there’s the flatner,” the trowman said. “Give me an ’and to get her in the water.”

The trowman pulled hard down the Parrett Estuary. As the banks widened into the Bristol Channel, the breeze freshened and it brought with it a deep, confused noise of shouting. A glow showed itself over the town of Bridgewater and became a glare that was reflected on clouds building up in the south. The trow-man paused to spit on his hands.

“See what I mean,” he said and fell to his rowing again.

The night passed slowly for the two, marooned on the tiny deserted island of Steepholm. They spent it on their knees, praying for those all over England, whose souls were passing into eternity that night. It seemed to Nicholas that he kept a vigil like those kept by squires on the eve of knighthood.

In the morning, the promised trow arrived, and Father Harrington and Nicholas were shut in the tiny cabin as she sailed peaceably through the narrowing waters of the Bristol Channel into the river Severn.

Days passed in close confinement before the trow made fast to a wooden staging at Pixham, a little south of Worcester, and the two travelers were sent on their way with the few words “Remember me to Tom” from the trowman. There followed hours of walking through the woods Nicholas had come to know so well, until they came to the secret entrance to the Sapey Valley. They were just removing their sodden cloaks at the head of the waterfall when Evan came striding to meet them.

“God be praised. It’s glad I am to see you, man,” he said to Nicholas and took off his bonnet to Father Harrington. “There’s bad news, look you. A company of soldiers is marching up to Clifton, and there’s no news of Tom whatever.”

## Chapter 12

### End of Clifton Court

"My mother," Nicholas said. "Is she at Clifton?"

"It's away at my Lord Delamere's house, she is. Went weeks ago with the Lady Anne. There's Sir Robert Lygon there. Came, he did, while the damage the pursuivants did at his house at Madresfield is being repaired, look you," Evan said.

"Then the fur will be flying. We'd better go and see if we can help. Father Harrington can stay in Tom's cottage," Nicholas said, and then, as the priest began to protest, he continued, "Oh, yes, Father. Now we've got you here, there's no sense in risking losing you. I wonder what's happened to Tom."

All the time he was speaking, Nicholas was walking rapidly through the Sapey Valley. He stopped at Tom's cottage long enough to open the door for Father Harrington and immediately went on with Evan to climb the oak to the dead-beech bridge. As they went along the rutted track between the village's cultivated strips, the confused sounds of shouting and jeering, just like those Nicholas had heard from Bridgewater, came from ahead. Nicholas quickened pace, and Evan placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"No point in rushing into it, man," he said. "Spy out the land first, look you."

Nicholas nodded and turned from the track into the belt of trees that bordered the village and edged the highroad opposite to Sir James Croome's house. Evan levered back the string of his crossbow and dropped a bolt into position. Nicholas drew his sword.

Between the heavy timber and the road, a belt of saplings, hazel bushes, and undergrowth provided shelter, and Nicholas and Evan crouched behind it. They peered through the leaves at the scene before Clifton Court. The noise had died, and for a brief minute, all those taking part in the tragedy were motionless, as if the sun and moon had been halted in their courses and time stood still.

Before the great oaken door of the house stood Sir James Croome and Sir Robert Lygon with drawn swords in their hands. A trickle of blood ran down Sir James's cheek and his mouth was drawn into a thin, grim line. Sir Robert was smiling as if he had not a care in the world, but there was no mirth in his eyes. At their side stood Harry the groom armed with a three-foot cudgel. Immediately before the two gentlemen, some dozen yards away, the hunched figure of Hoarfrost sat his horse, and on either side of him were two groups of three foot soldiers. At the side entrance that led to the stables, another two soldiers stood guard over a huddle of serving-maids. One armed man sat apart, nursing an arm between his knees, from which blood dripped slowly into the dust. Nicholas noted that there were four pikemen flanking the pursuivant and, between and behind them, two harquebusiers.

Hoarfrost's horse stirred, shook its bridle, and pawed the ground. It was as if the movement broke the spell, and Hoarfrost coughed raucously.

"This senseless resistance does you no good," he said acidly. "I have orders to search the houses of all popish recusant convicts and to imprison all those I suspect of plotting. I find two of you here together. This is a popish gathering for the purpose of furthering the rising against our gracious queen so recently revealed to Mr. Secretary Walsingham. Lay down your weapons. Your offense is worsened by this behavior."

Sir Robert Lygon laughed aloud.

“Now, by all the saints and St. Paul in particular, this twisted, wizened jackanapes, this warped and wrinkled reptile of Walsingham’s preaches at us. He expects us to lay down our swords and throw open our doors in gratitude for his pompous words. What a foolish, ineffectual little man it is. Let him come and take what he wants, eh, James?”

“Aye, let him come and his ruffians with him. They shame the name of Worcestershire,” Sir James said.

The soldiers shifted uncomfortably in the highway dust.

Sir Robert spoke again, gaily, to Hoarfrost. “When the Devil fashioned you, and made you a mockery of a man, he gave you a tangled mass of cruelties instead of a brain. Can’t you see that we understand that whatever we do or don’t do, the result to us is the same. So we choose to fight it out. And if we lose, as seems likely, considering the odds against us are three to one, we’ll have the pleasure of taking you and some of your minions with us. Yes, by Pluto and St. Peter.”

A voice at Nicholas’s side whispered, “Not three to one, Sir Robert, but three to two, by my reckoning, and less than that in a minute, by Puck.”

Nicholas turned his head sharply. Tom, in his weather-worn green doublet, was kneeling at his side, bow strung and ready in his right hand and his left forefinger at his lips. His eyes twinkled merrily at Nicholas.

“I like to see the play from the beginning,” he breathed.

Nicholas’s heart was lifted up within him with the knowledge of Tom’s presence. He turned his eyes back to the tableau in the highroad in time to see Hoarfrost speaking from the side of his mouth to the soldier on his extreme right.

“Break down the back door, you,” he said.

The man stolidly shouldered his pike and began to march to the stable entrance. Harry the groom licked his lips, lifted his cudgel, and ran lightly on tiptoe after the marching man. Hoarfrost opened his mouth to shout, but his words were drowned by the clang of Harry's club on the soldier's morion. It rang like the blow of a hammer on an iron pot and the man dropped his pike, turned slowly around on his heel, and sat down on the beaten earth with a bump that jarred the teeth in his head. He lifted a hand and removed his dented helmet while his head swung from side to side like a pendulum.

"My thanks to you, Master Pikeman," Harry said and brought his cudgel down on the man's unprotected skull with a crack like a pistol shot. The soldier swayed where he sat, fell backward, and lay motionless in the dust. Harry ran to his master's side again. The curved morion rocked slowly where it had fallen, upside down, on the road.

"Two," Sir Robert said and laughed again.

A movement on Hoarfrost's left caught Nicholas's eye, and he began to rise to his feet. Tom's hand pressed him down again, and he shook his head. Nicholas's attention had been attracted by the stealthy movement of a harquebusier who was partially concealed from Sir James and Sir Robert by his companions. His harquebus was prepared in its stand, and he was sighting along it at Sir James. Steadily he raised the glowing match to the powder pan. Tom rose on one knee, leveled his bow, waited until the match was within an inch of the powder, and squeezed the release. The harquebus rose a foot in the air, and its stand went spinning down the street. The surprised soldier remained stooping for a second, and in that flash of time, another bowstring twanged and a bolt appeared, piercing the tight seat of his breeches like a needle half-threaded through a cushion. He squealed and began to jump up and down with his hands clasped at his back.

“Stand up to his dinner, look you,” Evan said, and he and Tom smiled at one another. They bent their bows again.

Neither Sir James nor Sir Robert had allowed their eyes to wander for a moment from Hoarfrost. The pursuivant was glaring hate at the two gentlemen, and his mouth worked. His hand rested on his knife.

“Hoarfrost!” Sir James said quietly, but with deadly earnestness. “I would remind you of what I said before. The moment you order your men to attack us, we shall attack you — you personally. At least one of us will reach you. Think of it, Hoarfrost! Are you willing to give your life for your cause? We are, you know.”

Hoarfrost coughed and steeled himself. His eyes hooded themselves, and his lips became firm again.

“A difficult situation, Masters Croome and Lygon,” he said. “Or not perhaps so difficult as you think. I, too, could give my life for my cause, although you may not believe it.” He raised his chin, and his head trembled only slightly on his tortoise-like neck. “Perhaps we could come to some agreement. A payment maybe, in cash?”

Hoarfrost’s eyes unhooded themselves for a moment and then half-closed. Sir James and Sir Robert turned toward one another and spoke quietly.

Hoarfrost’s knife flashed out, and he said clearly, “Now!”

The three remaining pikemen lowered their halberds to the charge and began to advance toward the two gentlemen. They, in their turn, stepped forward with rapiers ready to repel the heavy weapons of their adversaries and to take the pursuivant on either side. The arquebusier on Hoarfrost’s right hand began to train his cumbersome weapon.

Nicholas, concealed behind the lush leaves of the hazels, held himself tensed. He whispered to Tom and Evan, without turning his head. “I’ve

an idea. Cover me when I go out.”

The two soldiers who were guarding the servants of Sir James’s household spoke fiercely to the women in their charge and lowered their pikes.

Nicholas was inspired. He had seen that the windows of the cottages in the village had been opened and there was a glint of eyes from the chinks of half-shut doors. From inside his doublet he took the silver whistle Tom had given him and put it between his lips. He was about to gamble on the loyalty and affection of Sir James’s tenants, and he had seen the harquebusier’s match still smoldering in the dust. He blew a shrill blast and ran from his hiding place, sword ready. Tom and Evan rose to their feet.

Suddenly all was confusion. Nicholas ran toward the glowing match, picked it up, and swung about toward Hoarfrost. A pike-man heard the small sound he made and turned to lunge at the new attacker in his rear. Nicholas skipped aside to avoid the gleaming steel point and thrust the shaft of the long weapon away with his rapier.

The movement brought him to within a foot of Hoarfrost’s horse, and the pursuivant raised his knife high in the air to plunge it in Nicholas’s back. In that second, Tom’s bowstring twanged and the knife flew from Hoarfrost’s hand, its wooden haft firmly fixed on the point of a crossbow bolt. Hoarfrost bowed forward over his horse’s neck, nursing a broken wrist. A quarrel from Evan’s bow sent the second harquebusier’s heavy weapon clattering to the ground, taking with it a portion of the man’s trigger finger so that he would never fire a gun again.

In the same moment, cottage doors were flung open and a crowd of the village men filled the street from side to side. They advanced on Hoarfrost’s few supporters, bearing billhooks, pitchforks, and scythes. The soldiers hesitated and glanced over their shoulders for orders from their leader, but he was still bowed in pain.

Nicholas thrust the burning match underneath the back of his saddle. The horse's shrill scream tore the air and the animal reared, tossed its head, and struck its rider on the face. The blood burst from Hoarfrost's nose and poured over his chin to soak into his doublet. His mount danced on hind legs, pawing the air with his forefeet, and stretched himself to a gallop, downhill, on the way to Worcester. The pursuivant rolled in the saddle, clutching the pommel with his one good hand, and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

The soldiers dropped their pikes, looked wildly at the advancing, menacing villagers, and those who could began to run after their master. Sir James and Sir Robert had advanced to aid Nicholas when Hoarfrost had raised his knife to strike. Now they were sheathing their swords and smiling. Nicholas glanced around the little battlefield. The villagers had surrounded Sir James and were cheering. Sir Robert had crossed the road to speak to Tom and Evan. The wounded lay where they had fallen, and already village women were kneeling at their sides. One of the soldiers whose duty it had been to guard Sir James's serving-maids was disentangling himself from women's cloaks flung over him when the last quick action had begun. The second was nowhere to be seen. Tom came to Nicholas's side.

"Good work, young master," he said. "It's a great thing in battles to know just when to attack. We've got you to thank for this, I reckon."

"You came in the nick of time, Tom," Nicholas answered. "We should have been lost without you."

"Ah, funny that is. There I was, champing at the bit because that priest who came ashore at Branscombe insisted on going out of the way to say a Mass or two at various great houses and I wanted to get home. Turned out for the best, all the same."

"Where is he now?" Nicholas asked.

"Out of sight by the beech bridge. Saying his office, as like as not. Queer chap he is and no mistake. Goes about his duty, as he sees it,

as if there weren't a pursuivant in all England. Reckon he'll go on just the same until he comes to the scaffold."

Sir Robert joined them.

"Who's going to the scaffold?" he asked, and before he could be given an answer, he swung on his heel and gasped. A blast of searing-hot, smoke-laden air swept across the road and set all those in its path coughing. An ominous crackling came from Clifton Court, and women screamed from the kitchen quarters.

Sir James Croome ran to his own front door and flung it wide. A sheet of flame burst from it, singeing his hair and beard. His cook came running, skirts lifted to her knees.

"Master! Master!" she called. "There's a soldier going from room to room with a flaming torch! The tapestry's burning! The staircase is on fire!"

At that moment, the ground-floor windows burst with the noise of cannon, and flames rushed out and began to lick up the outside walls. The heat drove the onlookers to the other side of the road. An attic casement was smashed open, and the face of the second soldier who had guarded the maids looked out.

"Who wins in the end, Sir James Croome?" he jeered. The expression on his face changed, and he looked behind him. He screamed and covered his face with his hands. With a roar and a crash, the roof fell in and a column of fire-reddened smoke and sparks rose high over Clifton Hall.

"That man was a gardener of mine," Sir James said. "I sent him packing because he wasn't to be trusted when Mr. Greenleaf came. God rest his soul." Sir James crossed himself.

The villagers with their ineffectual buckets of water stopped laboring and went to their cottages as the sun neared the horizon. Clifton

Court was a smoking ruin of charred rafters and heat-shattered brick. Sir James looked at it sadly.

“I was happy there when I was a boy,” he said. “That was before all this evil came to the land.”

“It will rise again,” Tom said. “Other Croomes will live there, and there will be freedom and happiness.” His eyes were shining with prophecy. “There won’t be pursuivants then, and men will not sacrifice their lives for their priesthood.” He stopped, and when he spoke again, his voice had regained its usual Worcestershire burr.

“Nought for it but the valley, I reckon. Might as well get going.” He picked up his crossbow and swung it over his shoulder. He turned and began to trudge toward the sunset.

Nicholas remained for a moment, watching the wisps of smoke rise into the still summer evening air. Tom’s words were ringing in his mind as if they were spoken against a background of sweet, soft music. He prayed a silent prayer that he might do something to bring about Tom’s prophecy. Then he, too, turned and began to walk after the others to the only home left to him, among the ruins of the secret valley.

## Chapter 13

### Scarlet Petticoats

A few days of August passed with two priests and two gentlemen roughly lodged in the house alongside the ancient abandoned church, and Nicholas sleeping once more in the low bed of his sickness in Tom's cottage. Tom disappeared on his mysterious errands and returned one day with the news that Mr. Anthony Babington and his fellows had stood trial in London for their conspiracy and were awaiting execution. There were other and mysterious tales of plot and counterplot and forgery that Tom was unable to explain.

Tom made his report in the low, dark-beamed room of the house by the church, where the only light came from the log fire set in the depths of the wide hearth.

"Not much more I can tell you, gentlemen," he said at the end.

"Certain sure it is there was something queer about this plot and that the Lady Mary of Scotland knew something about it, but not all, to my way of thinking. Trouble is, these messages I get come through so many mouths, they get garbled at times. It's one thing to get a message saying simply, 'Cargo at Branscombe,' although I've known that come as 'Sago is handsome,' which it ain't, heaven knows. But long ones is different."

"You know, James," Sir Robert Lygon said, "there's something here that ought to be looked into. What d'you say to riding up to London with me and finding out what the truth is. Time I stretched my legs, by St. Christopher. Can't vegetate here much longer, charming though it is, thanks to you, Longbow."

Sir James roused himself from the depression that had settled over him with the loss of Clifton Court. "Yes, I'd like that. Might seek an audience with Her Majesty, God bless her. Do no harm to let her

know what happened at Madresfield and Clifton, even though it's not likely to do any good. But first I must go over to Stoke Edith and see my wife. The news of the fire will have reached there by now. I should like to tell my Lord Delamere the truth about that, too. What about you, Nicholas? Would you like to come with me?"

"Begging your pardon, Sir James," Tom put in. "The young master and me have got work to do. There's more 'cargo' to collect from Devon. The two priests here already have got to be passed on as soon and as secret as possible. There's Mr. Greenleaf due in a few days, and he's got to be met before he comes riding to Clifton Court as bold as brass." He hesitated and added, "It's true Evan could do that, so it's up to Master Nicholas."

"I think, sir, with your permission, I ought to stay with Tom," Nicholas said. "It really is necessary to get the priests into England and to keep them as safe as possible. The more I think about it, the more I believe they're the only hope for our future."

"As you please. Longbow'll do his best to look after you, I know."

"And the young master after me," Tom said with a glance of affection from his bright eyes.

"Then we might make a start in the morning, Robin," Sir James continued to Sir Robert Lygon. "I suppose there won't be any difficulty on the road?"

"There may well be," Sir Robert Lygon answered. "But I've always found that if you ride innocently on your way, there's not much trouble, and if there is, you lose your temper and out with your sword. Those the pursuivants employ haven't any stomach for cold steel."

All four of them attended Mass in the ancient church the next morning. Nicholas walked in and genuflected before the altar. He felt that he hardly knew the place. The first time he had entered the building, he had sensed that it was sunk in a sleep that was near to death. Now,

after the Masses that had been said again, it had stirred and come to life. The ancient walls held within them a secret power that flowed into Nicholas's soul and filled his mind with a steadfast resolve to go forward without wavering, seeking to bring compassion into his country.

Nicholas climbed to the lip of the valley with his stepfather and Sir Robert the next morning, and watched them go on the search for the horses that had been rescued from the fire a few days before. He noticed with a smile that Sir James had recovered his swagger and once more his sword was cocked with a jaunty air.

A week was spent in the valley, laboring hard with Tom and Evan in and about the ruined cottages, for Tom had a dream of rebuilding them and making the valley into a flourishing community as it had been centuries before. Privately, Nicholas thought that Tom would never see his dream come true, but he saw no shame in back-breaking work that helped to keep Tom happy and he rejoiced in his own hardening muscles. Then, in the mellow days of September, Tom and he set out once more on the long journey to the south.

Three times, as the days shortened and the winds grew colder, Tom and Nicholas kept a rendezvous with Philip Topsham in Devon, and three times they returned by devious ways, in safety with their "cargo" to the Sapey Valley, until a day came in dreary December when they returned to find Sir James Croome and Sir Robert Lygon lounging before the fire in the priest's house by the church. It was a long story the two gentlemen had to tell, and Tom and Nicholas sat listening in silence for a full half-hour before Sir Robert drew toward the end of his tale.

". . . So you see, this young fool Babington wrote letters to the Lady Mary of Scotland, and they were smuggled into her prison at Chartley Hall in casks of beer. But before they reached her, every one, going in and coming out, was read by that bigoted inhuman Puritan Sir Amias Paulet, who is her jailer. The story goes, in London, that my

Lord Burghley and Mr. Secretary Walsingham caused a postscript to be forged to the last letter proving that the Lady Mary was privy to Babington's plot to murder her cousin, our gracious queen. For myself, I cannot believe that young Babington ever intended murder and, even if he had, the Lady Mary would never have countenanced it. Anyway, on the strength of this so-called evidence, the queen was persuaded to sign the Lady Mary's death warrant. She keeps postponing the date of execution, so obviously she doesn't want her cousin's blood on her hands, but there's no doubt the warrant is signed."

"But how would the death of the Queen of Scots benefit the Lady Elizabeth, our queen?" Nicholas asked.

"Personally, not at all," Sir Robert answered. "It's true that the Lady Mary is a staunch Catholic and next in succession to the throne, but the queen stands too firm in the affection of her subjects to fear any attempt on her life by an Englishman. Nevertheless, those unscrupulous men who are her advisers have persuaded her, backed by their false letters, that such an attempt was planned."

"Then it's really the queen's ministers who want the Lady Mary killed," Nicholas said.

"Put it like this," Tom said. "Suppose the queen should die — naturally, I mean. She's over fifty, and it might happen. The Lady Mary comes to the throne. The first thing she does is try to make England Catholic again. She wouldn't succeed, not to my way of thinking, but she might give back to the Church some of the possessions that have been stolen. Now, who's got them?"

"The queen's ministers, among others," Nicholas said.

"There you are. Stands to reason, they don't want a Catholic queen," Tom said.

“What it amounts to, then, is the Lady Mary’s going to be killed to safeguard stolen lands now in the possession of the Lady Elizabeth’s ministers,” Nicholas said.

“You put it somewhat too simply, Nicholas,” Sir Robert said. “But there’s a lot of truth in what you say.”

“Can nothing be done to save her?” Nicholas asked.

“James and I talked about it for hours on the road,” Sir Robert answered. “We came to the conclusion there’s nothing to be done. It’s impossible to get in touch with the Lady Mary, either personally or by letter. The Babington affair has proved that. My opinion is that the Lady Mary has let herself be convinced that Catholic gentlemen will rise to save her from the block and put her on the throne of England. They won’t, and that’s quite definite. The reason is that such a thing’s impossible while Queen Elizabeth’s alive. What’s more, you can’t build a new state of freedom and happiness, Catholic or any other, on a foundation that’s cemented with innocent blood. Once you try, the blood’s got to keep on flowing. Burghley and Walsingham have found that already.”

“That’s true,” Tom growled. “It’s what the Jesuits are preaching.”

“But surely,” Nicholas said, “if the Lady Mary could be made to understand that there won’t be a rising, couldn’t she write to the queen, explaining that all she wants is to live in peace as a loyal subject? Couldn’t she explain that she wants no plots or risings? Sir Amias Paulet wouldn’t stop her doing that, would he?”

“Maybe she might save her life in some such way. Or at least get an indefinite postponement of her execution,” Sir Robert said. “But no one can get in touch with her. I said so.”

“Is Chartley Hall so closely guarded?” Nicholas asked.

“Stiff with soldiers, I’m told. If you’re thinking you could get into Chartley Hall and see the Lady Mary, you can put it out of your mind. Not only is it impossible, but she’s being moved from there. We found out in London she’s being taken to Fotheringay Castle. That’s in Northamptonshire, and it’s my opinion that’s where she’ll be executed.”

“When is she going?” Nicholas asked.

“They’ll keep that secret. Stands to reason,” Tom answered.

The four of them fell silent in the dark room. It seemed that in the shadowed corners, the ghosts of hope and kindness lurked.

“She’s going to a strange place, or is there already,” Nicholas said at last. “There’ll be servants Sir Amias Paulet doesn’t know. Tradesmen, too, I dare say. It might not be impossible to get into Fotheringay and see her.”

“Anyone caught trying it would be hanged out of hand,” Sir Robert said.

“Not unless it was shown that he was trying to get to the Queen of Scots. After all, people must go in and out of the castle innocently. I’d like to try. May I, Sir James?”

“You’d be risking your life, Nicholas,” Sir James said. “How could I say to your mother that I’d given you permission to do that?”

“I risk my life every time I ride with a priest,” Nicholas answered.

“No,” Sir James said. “It’s a foolhardy scheme. You might get into Fotheringay, I grant you that. You might even find your way into the Lady Mary’s presence, but you’d never get out again. Paulet’s a man without compassion, and your youth wouldn’t save you. When you ride with a priest, you have a chance, and in any case, the penalties

for aiding priests have been forced on us. In this, you make up your own mind to go to your death. I'll have nothing to do with it."

"Not even to save the life of the Lady Mary? Not even to save the Catholic succession for England?" Nicholas said quietly.

"Not even for that," Sir James replied. "It's doubtful even if the Scottish queen would listen to you. There's nothing we can do but pray for her."

Nicholas bowed his head. In his mind was a picture of a young and gallant queen beset by enemies. He imagined her, chin held high, facing ill-mannered uncouth guards, ready for rescue and to play a leading part in bringing back freedom and peace to England. He did not know that his gallant lady was in fact an aging woman, embittered by nineteen years of captivity, and in such continual bodily pain that she would welcome death in any form. He rose to his feet and asked for permission to leave.

Fully a fortnight went by before Nicholas opened his heart to Tom. During that time, he had spent hours in the ancient church, and his mind was made up.

"Tom," he said, "I'm going to try to get into Fotheringay and see the Lady Mary. If I don't, I'll never forget all my life that I could have tried and I did nothing. I shall ride for Northamptonshire in the morning without telling my stepfather. If I fail, will you tell him that I had to make the attempt?"

Tom slowly stroked his chin with his strong and slender hand.

"Young master," he said seriously, "I warn you: I think Sir James is right. It's a forlorn hope. But if you've made up your mind, you don't go alone. I go with you." A bright happy smile creased his lean brown cheeks. "And if neither of us comes back, well, there's Evan. Let him tell Sir James."

In the late afternoon of February 8 in the year 1587, Nicholas and Tom came in sight of Fotheringay Castle. They were wet and chilled with the cold rains of February and splashed with mud from head to foot from the morass-like English roads. Their horses they had stabled in the little town of Oundle and had trudged the three and a half miles to the castle, first through sodden fields and then through sorrowing woods where the leafless branches gave no shelter from the dripping rain. Neither Tom nor Nicholas carried weapons, the better to pass as serving-men. They stood, partially concealed by the massive trunk of an oak, marveling at the traffic on the road near Fotheringay.

Country gentlemen were riding away from the castle and occasionally a great Lord and his retinue passed. A brooding stillness seemed to hang over all the travelers. There were no merry calls or jests and the only sounds that accompanied their passage were the squelch of hooves pulled from the clinging mud, the soft creaking of leather, and the jingling of harness.

A heavy country wagon laden with a great pile of barrels came struggling along the road. The horses were straining at their traces, and the wagoner at their heads was encouraging them with hand and voice. As it drew opposite to Tom and Nicholas, it was forced to the side of the highway by a cavalcade of gentlemen silently riding knee to knee. The near side wheels slipped and slithered almost into the ditch, the pile of barrels tottered, and two of the topmost swayed, rolled from their perch, and fell with a splash into the mud.

The wagoner raised his hands, palm upward, to his shoulders in a gesture of despair, and let them fall again to his sides. Even he was silent, and none of the curses Tom expected came from his lips.

“Lend a hand,” Tom said. “Find out what’s going on.”

Tom and Nicholas laid hands on a barrel and swung it onto the side of the wagon. It was empty and light. Tom clambered on the mound of

casks, received the first fallen barrel from Nicholas, and wedged it into place. With an effortless swing that told of muscles in perfect trim, Nicholas heaved the second to Tom. He jumped down and turned to the wagoner.

"Want a rope round this 'ere," Tom said. " 'Tain't safe with all these horsemen about."

"You're right there," the man said. "Took six full in last night, and I'm told to carry twenty-four empties away this morning. Too much for one man to 'andle. Didn't want to stop to tie 'em on. Get away from 'ere, I said to meself, quick. Place gives me the creeps."

"What's the matter?" Tom asked. "What's going on?"

"Strangers, eh? You must be, not to know that." The carter looked suspiciously at Tom and Nicholas, and was reassured by their dirty bedraggled appearance.

"We're on the road," Tom said quickly. "No work in our village."

"Ah. Times is cruel hard. Wouldn't have touched this job if they hadn't been. Don't like it and never did, and that's what I said to the wife. What about the little 'uns, she said to me; they got bellies, ain't they, she said, what's got to be filled. If you don't do the job, somebody else will. Thought she was right, I did, but I ain't so sure now. There won't be no luck come out o' this job. What d'you say, mate?"

"Can't turn down a job. Stands to reason," Tom said. "What's wrong with it, any road?"

"It's all on account of her they called the Queen of Scots. 'Course, you wouldn't know, being strangers. They brought her here to the castle, see? A few weeks ago. She tried to murder the Lady Elizabeth, God bless her, or so they say. But how she could do that when she's been shut up tighter than a kernel in a nut is more than I can tell."

Nicholas was staring at the wagoner with his eyes wide. "You said she's been shut up. Do you mean she's not shut up anymore?"

"They killed her this morning. Cut her head off. Saw it meself, I did, and it'll haunt me . . ."

"This morning . . . ?" Nicholas said, and the blood slowly drained from his face, leaving it dead white. Tom's fingers closed around Nicholas's wrist like a steel fetter.

"We came too late," Nicholas whispered. "We came too late."

The wagoner was talking slowly and did not hear Nicholas's words. ". . . Six barrels of ale for the soldiers, I brought, and three bolts of new black cloth for the scaffold. Brought it, I did, in me wagon, this 'ere wagon, as'll have a curse on it as long as I've got it. What's more, I helped drape the platform with the cloth. Forced me to it, they did."

"Who forced you?" Tom asked.

"Why, some of the soldiers. Hadn't got enough men to finish in time, they said. As it was, I'd only just knocked in the last nail when the sheriff banged on her door. Must 'ave been waiting the other side, she must, because she came straight out."

"You saw her?" Nicholas asked in a cold, clear voice from which all emotion had been drained.

" 'Course I saw her. Pushed me back against the wall, they did, and told me to stay still and keep me mouth shut. Saw her! Couldn't take me eyes off her. All in black she was. There was my Lord of Shrewsbury and my Lord of Kent sitting in chairs and all their gentlemen standing about, and the county gentlemen, too. I'd have got out fast enough if I could, you mark my words."

"He saw her," Nicholas repeated in the same cold voice.

“Telling you, ain’t I? Then her ladies took off her black dress. Underneath, all her clothes was scarlet, the color of blood . . . Then she knelt down, and . . .”

“Did she have a priest?” Nicholas asked.

“A priest? Oh, you mean a Romish priest. No. There was none of that kind there. But there was the Dean of Peterborough. Know him well, I do, by sight. He’s a fine gentleman. All the same, I wish I hadn’t seen it. Haunt me the rest of my life, it will. But what could I do?”

“What could you do?” Nicholas said. The wagoner looked at him and shrank back a pace. Nicholas was standing with his young back straight, his eyes blazing in his colorless face. Raindrops glistened on his cheeks like tears. “Nothing. You could do nothing. But I’ll tell you what you can do now. You can pray for her soul.” He and Tom crossed themselves. “Then after that, you can pray for the end of cruelty and injustice in England. That’s what you can do.”

He swung on his heel and marched away between the trees with the rain dripping from his shoulders and hair and running down his cheeks, bringing a salt taste to his lips.

Tom lingered for a moment.

“And that,” he said to the wagoner, “is another thing you can tell to the little ’uns when you get back to ’em tonight. And see they haven’t forgotten it when you’re an old man sitting in the chimney corner remembering what you’ve seen today.” He turned and hurried after Nicholas.

Neither Tom nor Nicholas spoke as they hurried through woods and across meadows to Oundle and their horses.

Ten miles passed under the hooves before Nicholas turned to Tom and said, simply, “I know now what I’m going to do with my life.”

Tom was surprised to see a little smile curve the grim straight line of Nicholas's mouth. He could not know that in his mind, Nicholas was hearing a faint fanfare of silver trumpets like those that might have sounded a welcome from eternity for the tired, unhappy queen.

## Chapter 14

### Farewell to Youth

Spring came late in the year 1587, and the Branscombe woods were still clothed in their bright new greens when, at the end of April, Nicholas, Tom, and Evan walked the well-known paths to Philip's cave. Only a few weeks had passed since the death of the Lady Mary, Queen of Scotland and Dowager Queen of France. Short as the time had been, many events had been crowded into it. Tom and Nicholas had returned to the Sapey Valley, and with only a night's rest to refresh him, Nicholas had ridden on to the house of the Lord Delamere at Stoke Edith to speak to his mother and Sir James Croome. He broke the news to them that he had decided to become a priest.

The Lady Anne rose to her feet and put an arm about Nicholas's shoulders. "It's what I thought you'd do, those nights when we sat and talked together in Tom's cottage, and it was because I thought it that I said I'd always have a home for you," she murmured to him.

Nicholas's mother cried a little and at last smiled at her son through her tears. She had in her mind a picture of a little boy playing happily in a Yorkshire garden and, at last, grown into a tall man, facing stern Protestant judges for his priesthood, still with the innocence and wonder of youth in his eyes. Sir James shook him by the hand and immediately began to talk of ways and means of realizing Nicholas's inheritance from his father so that the cost of his training at the English college at Douai could be paid. The Lady Anne went away to persuade her father to get for her an official permit to travel south to visit Mistress Mary Topsham, Philip's mother, in Branscombe. By that means, Nicholas, Tom, and Evan could travel as her servants and there would be no risk of Nicholas's arrest on the road by pursuivants and the end, in a London prison, of all his hopes.

So the dark days of winter passed away, and the cold winds of the official spring took their place. Nicholas's last morning came, and the little party of travelers gathered at the great doors of Lord Delamere's house with those they were leaving behind.

"Clifton Court will be rebuilt by the time you come back, Nicholas," Sir James said. "I shall get Little John Owen to make in it the finest priest's hole you ever heard of, so if you do have to hide, you'll do it in comfort."

Nicholas laughed. "Let's hope it won't come to that, sir, with Tom's valley so nearby." He kissed his mother and mounted.

He turned at the wrought-iron gates leading to the village of Stoke Edith and looked for the last time on his family. Sir James's sword was cocked at its usual jaunty angle. His mother took her handkerchief from her eyes and waved, and his little sister, Elizabeth, stood, with eyes wide and a finger in her rounded mouth. When next he came to England, not only the three of them would be his family, but included in it would be all Catholics from the greatest lords down to the meanest peasants.

So when at last the warm spring breezes began to blow and the woods were green in Devon, the travelers came to Branscombe. The Lady Anne and Nicholas supped with Mistress Topsham, and after the meal was over, Nicholas stood looking through leaded windowpanes and watched Anne Delamere walking with Philip Topsham in the twilit garden. He saw Philip's head bend toward the Lady Anne's and his hand take hers. He saw the Lady Anne release her fingers and place Philip's arm about her waist. The proud, beautiful head inclined and rested on the young man's shoulder. A little seed of understanding took root in Nicholas's mind and began to grow. He smiled to himself and turned to join Tom and Evan in the kitchen.

In the small hours when the young moon had risen, Nicholas, Philip, Tom, and Evan made their way to the solitary pine on the cliff top. The *Seamew* was anchored, waiting, and the rope ladder lowered. Nicholas clasped the hands of his friends and, in silence, climbed down to the waiting boat. Philip rolled up his ladder and, without a backward glance, began the walk home.

Tom and Evan stood on the cliff top, watching while the lugger weighed anchor and the sails were set. When the ship was no more than a vague shape in the path of the moon on the water, Tom shouldered his crossbow.

“I suppose,” he said to Evan, “when he comes again, we shall have to call him Father. And there have been so many times when I wished I could have called him son.”

The two men turned from the sea and disappeared in the darkness under the trees.



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